A Lt. Frank Hastings Novel

VICTIMS

Collin Wilcox

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Dragged from sleep by the shrill ring of the telephone, Lt. Frank Hastings of the San Francisco Police Department is in a foul mood. It does not improve when he learns that there has been a murder at the home of Alex Guest, a rich and powerful local attorney. The icing on the cake is that the victim is one Charlie Quade, a former homicide detective on Hastings' squad.

The investigation uncovers the festering sores of a family torn by the ruthless demands of the egocentric lawyer. Guest has driven his daughter into two divorces and so interfered with her life that she takes refuge in a bottle. Now, Alex Guest wants his grandson and he is a man who is used to having his way.

Every one of the instincts that makes Hastings a good cop leads him to the conclusion that a perfect frame has been constructed. All he has to do is see to it that the right man is hung.

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VICTIMS

ONE

FROM THE KITCHEN I HEARD THE SOUND OF THE REFRIGERATOR door closing, followed a few moments later by the sound of water running. Ann had drunk her half glass of nonfat milk and rinsed out the glass, a nightly ritual. The click of the light switch in the kitchen came next, followed by the rhythmical shuffling of her slippers on the hallway carpet. I opened my eyes as she came into the bedroom. She slipped out of her robe and draped it over the foot of the bed, then stood motionless in the darkness, silhouetted against the pale oblong of the room's large single window. Her nightgown was sheer: soft, transparent gauze tracing the swell of her breasts, the curve of her stomach and thigh. Her hair was loose around her shoulders. She was standing with her chin lifted, back arched, as if she were trying to identify some distant sound in the night.

Did she know how erotic her body was, outlined against the pale window light? Had I ever told her that she excited me more when she wore her nightgown than when she was naked?

Did she know that, yes, I could feel myself tightening, sexually quickening?

"You have a chronic case of the weekend hots," she'd once said, mischievously teasing me after we'd made love.

And, yes, she was right. For as long as I could remember, Friday and Saturday nights were those special times for love.

But it was no longer Friday night. It was 2:15 A.M. Saturday morning. Beneath a blanket of fog blowing in from the ocean, San Francisco was finally falling silent. The theaters were dark, and the bars had just closed. Only the hookers and the bathhouses and the after-hours clubs were still doing business.

We'd gone to a small French restaurant in the neighborhood for dinner, then gone to a movie—a double feature. Driving home, yawning and laughing about it, we'd ruefully agreed that Friday night double features were for teenagers.

Now she was turning to sit on her side of the bed while she took off her slippers, bending down to align them perpendicularly to the bed. Ann is a precise person, a methodical person, a person who depends on order in her life. She teaches fourth grade at the City School for Boys, one of San Francisco's few private schools. Once, visiting her in her classroom after school, I'd chided her about her pens and pencils, each one aligned so precisely in her center desk drawer.

I'd drawn back the blanket for her, as I always did. She slid beneath the covers, sighed once, deeply, then turned toward me—as I turned toward her. I slid my left hand between the pillow and her neck. I felt her body responding, moving closer to mine.

But it was a tentative response, gently temporizing. She kissed me: a light, noncommittal kiss. The message was clear. Tonight—this particular Friday night—she was too tired. She hoped—believed—that I would understand.

Confirming it, she buried her face in the hollow of my shoulder, whispering: "I'm pooped. Aren't you?" As she spoke, I felt her body come tentatively closer. But, like the kiss, it was a confirmation of affection, not an invitation to make love.

"Well—" I moved my right hand, lightly caressing the small of her back, exploring that particular mystery of flesh between the cleft of her buttocks and the base of her spine. My

message, I knew, was equally clear: Yes, I understood that she was tired. But, no, I couldn't quite forget that it was, after all, Friday night.

"How about tomorrow night?" she whispered, still with her head tucked into the hollow of my shoulder.

"Promise?"

"Promise."

"We've got a deal." I tilted her head and kissed her. She kissed me in return, patted me companionably on the rump, sighed, then turned away from me to lie on her back, settling herself with small, sinuous shiftings of body and limbs.

"Good night." I turned on my side, yawning as I let my eyes close.

The weekend hots . . .

To myself, I smiled. I'd first met Ann in the line of duty, standing on her porch in the dead of night with my shield in my hand. My first impression of her had been accurate. "Quiet." "Reserved." "Sometimes shy." Those were the adjectives that described Ann. Plus the old-fashioned adjective "ladylike."

Her older son Dan, a teenager, had been a witness to murder, and briefly a suspect. My second interrogation had confirmed that Dan had no guilty knowledge. But, as long as the investigation continued, I found excuses to call at Ann's large, tastefully furnished Victorian flat on Green Street—the flat we now shared, together with her two sons. When the investigation terminated, I knocked on her door again, to tell her about it. Then, with great effort, I asked her to dinner. She'd accepted with a smile that made me feel like a euphoric, erotic teenager. During that first dinner, we exchanged our life stories. She'd been born in Cleveland, where her father practiced high-stakes law and her mother raised prize-winning roses. But the father was a compulsive philanderer, and her mother began secretly drinking, to forget. College had been Ann's first chance to escape from an unhappy home, and she chose the University of California at Berkeley because it was farther from Cleveland than the eastern colleges. In her junior year she met Victor Haywood, a sophomore medical student.

They were married at the end of Ann's junior year, when Ann was two months' pregnant. She dropped out of school, raising her child and working part time while Victor took a residency in psychiatry. As the years passed, she had another son, went back to college, graduated, and got a teaching certificate—while her husband bought Porsches and collected pre-Columbian art. Most of Victor's patients were neurotic society matrons, many of whom he slept with. When their younger son, Billy, was ten years old, Ann decided to. . . .

On the nightstand, the telephone rang. Muttering a muffled obscenity, I picked it up on the first ring. Beside me, Ann's body jerked convulsively; she'd been asleep.

"Yes?" I spoke softly, at the same time swinging my legs over the side of the bed to sit with my back turned to Ann.

"It's Canelli, Lieutenant Hastings. Jeeze, I'm *really* sorry to bother you. I know how late it is, and everything, and I thought about it long and hard before I figured that I just had to—"

"Wait, Canelli. I'm going to hang this phone up and pick up the one in the living room. If we get cut off, call again in two minutes. Clear?"

"Yessir, that's clear."

I cradled the phone, found my slippers, slipped into my robe and walked reluctantly to the living room, closing the hallway door behind me. Canelli was still on the phone. As soon as I answered, he began talking.

"Maybe you won't even want to take a look, Lieutenant. But, like I already said, I just figured that I had to at least touch base with you, especially seeing that Lieutenant Friedman is still in Sacramento, I guess, and won't be up on the roster until tomorrow. So, when I thought about it, I figured that—"

"Canelli. Get to the point. What happened?"

"Well, Jeez, Lieutenant—" As I listened to Canelli gulping for breath, I could visualize him. Because Canelli always perspired whenever he reported to a superior officer, his broad, swarthy, olive-hued face would certainly be slightly

sweat-sheened. His forehead would be earnestly furrowed, his dark eyes anxious as he struggled to organize his thoughts. At age thirty, at a suety two hundred forty pounds, Canelli was the squadroom innocent. He didn't look like a policeman or act like a policeman or think like a policeman. Result: He was constantly scoring accidental coups. On stakeout, he was always the last one to be recognized. Making an arrest in cooperation with other officers, Canelli sometimes found the suspect running toward him, trying to escape. No one took Canelli seriously—until it was too late.

"What happened," he was saying, "is that Charlie Quade got shot, for God's sake. Killed. Just about an hour ago, maybe a little longer."

Charlie Quade . . .

We'd gone through the ranks together, made detective together, went into Homicide together, years ago. I'd never liked Charlie, never trusted him. Soon after I made lieutenant, he'd been suspected of taking money from a pimp in exchange for concealing evidence against one of the pimp's girls when she'd been accused of murder. I'd given Quade a choice: resign or talk to the D.A. The next day, he'd resigned.

"If Charlie got killed," I said, stifling a yawn, "he probably deserved it." But then I remembered that Quade had resigned while Canelli was still in uniform. To Canelli, my remark might have seemed brutal. "Did you know him?" I asked.

"Just a little bit," he answered. "And I heard that he was a crook, which didn't surprise me. I mean, I never really thought much of him. But that's not the reason I'm calling, Lieutenant. I mean, if it was just a—you know—an ordinary homicide, and everything, I wouldn't call you like this, in the middle of the night, even if Quade *was* a cop. No way. I'd handle it myself, if that's all there was to it."

"Canelli. You still haven't told me what happened."

"Oh. Sorry, Lieutenant. Well—" He drew a deep, portentous breath. "Well, the reason I'm calling, see, is that Charlie Quade was killed at Alexander Guest's house, for God's

sake. You know, the big shot lawyer. And, what's more, it turns out that Quade was working for Alexander Guest."

I sat up straighter.

"And Mr. Guest, he wants to talk to you," Canelli was saying. "He insists on talking to you, if you want to know the truth. Or, at least, he wants to talk to whoever's in charge, whoever calls the shots. So I—you know—I thought I should at least fill you in, before you talk to him. I mean, he's what you'd call a pretty powerful personality."

"Are you on the scene now?"

"Yessir. I've been here for almost an hour."

"Can you talk?"

"Yessir."

"What's it look like to you?"

"Well, it looks like Quade was inside the house, guarding the premises. And it looks like someone might've broken in, although I didn't see anything jimmied, or anything. But, anyhow, shots were fired, no question about that. Several shots."

"Do you have a suspect?"

"Well—" He hesitated. "Not really."

"What's that mean?"

"Well, Mr. Guest, he thinks he knows who did it. But I thought I should talk to you before I acted on his information. I mean, I figured I'd be exceeding my authority, see, if I—"

"Is Mr. Guest there now?"

"He's upstairs, Lieutenant. In his bedroom. I'm down in the kitchen. Like I say, he wants to talk to you, privately—or, anyhow, someone in command, like I said. So that's why I—"

"Let me talk to him."

"Yessir. I'll go tell him."

"When we're finished talking, you come back on the line."

"Yessir." The line clicked dead. I looked at the antique brass-and-glass clock on the mantelpiece, one of Ann's heirlooms. The time was 2:35 A.M. Would I have to get dressed and go to work? With no sleep? At the thought, I realized that I

was slowly, hopelessly shaking my head. The answer to the question was grimly self-evident. A homicide that involved Alexander Guest couldn't be handled over the phone.

"Lieutenant Hastings?" The voice in my ear was brisk, crisply authoritative.

"Mr. Guest."

"That's correct, sir. Has Inspector Canelli filled you in?"

"To some extent. He wanted me to talk to you. He says you've got a suspect."

"I do. Definitely. Are you coming here?"

To myself, I sighed. "Yessir, I am. But Inspector Canelli thought I should talk to you first. He says that—"

"He was right, of course. Superficially, he looks like a bumbler. But, watching him work, it's apparent that he knows his job."

I smiled. Alexander Guest didn't mince words—and didn't miss anything, either. "He does know his job," I said. "No question."

"The man you want," Guest said, "is Gordon Kramer. He's thirty-six years old. Dark hair, dark eyes. Medium build. Regular features. He'll be well dressed. And, most important, he'll be traveling with a young boy, age six. If I were you, Lieutenant, I'd put out an all points bulletin for Gordon Kramer. Right now. In particular, you should get the airports covered. Immediately. Because I can guarantee—absolutely guarantee—that, right this minute, he'll be trying to get on an airplane, bound for New York."

"Are you prepared to give us a signed statement that you're accusing Gordon Kramer of murder, Mr. Guest?"

"Absolutely."

"Did you see him do it? Were you an actual witness?"

"No, not an eyewitness," he answered impatiently. "But I know he did it, and when you get here, I'll give you details. But, for now, you'd better get it on the radio, Lieutenant. It's been more than an hour since the murder was committed. He could be at the boarding gate now. And, to be perfectly frank, thinking down the line, it won't look very good

for you if the record shows that you didn't act on the information I'm giving you."

My first reaction was a flash of momentary anger. Whenever anyone threatened me with his "influence," my first reaction was to let him try. But I'd learned, the hard way, that people like Alexander Guest could do a lot of damage. So I let a long, deliberate beat pass while I tried to sort it out. Guest was a lawyer, therefore an officer of the court. If he wrote out a complaint, in front of witnesses, I would protect myself from a charge of false arrest because of insufficient evidence. If I took proper precautions, I couldn't lose, doing as he asked.

"Well?" he demanded, his voice harshly sarcastic. "What's the problem, Lieutenant? Haven't you the authority to have him picked up?"

"Yessir, I have." I let another deliberate silence pass, then said, "After I talk to you, I'll talk to Inspector Canelli. I'll order him to witness you writing out your statement. He'll have a third party witness it, too. Then I'll tell Canelli to put out the A.P.B., on my authority."

"That'll be fine. You're a cautious man, Lieutenant. That's commendable."

"Thanks," I answered wearily, at the same time reaching for a scratch pad and pencil. "Where're you located, Mr. Guest?"

"I'm in Sea Cliff. 270 El Camino Del Mar."

I wrote it down, then asked, "This Gordon Kramer—is there a connection between him and you?"

I heard a sharp, bitter exhalation. "There *was* a connection. He used to be my son-in-law."

"And the boy. Who's he?"

"The boy," he answered, "is John Kramer. My grandson."

TWO

THE GUEST MANSION WAS TUDOR STYLE, THREE STORIES HIGH, built of brick and cut stone, with a slate roof, lead-paned windows, and heroic chimneys. A magnificent round medallion stained glass window was set above the front portico, illuminated from within. The premises were entirely surrounded by a wrought iron fence topped by small, sharp fleur-de-lis. A driveway led along the right side of the building to a large garage built to resemble an old English timber-and-stucco carriage house. No gate secured the entrance to the driveway, and the pedestrian gate across the flagstone walkway leading to the mansion's entryway opened to the touch. As I walked through the gate I wondered whether the gate was equipped with a warning buzzer that sounded inside the house.

I didn't recognize the uniformed patrolman stationed at the front door, but he saluted, called me by name and opened the massive carved oak door for me. As I entered, I saw the patrolman's attention shift to the street. The white coroner's van was backing into the driveway beside the house. A coroner's station wagon followed, with two men inside. Checking my watch, I calculated that it had probably taken them an hour and a half to respond, about average for a Friday night.

At the curb, I counted three black-and-white police units and two unmarked inspector's cars.

Canelli was waiting for me in the foyer. Sitting in an enormous carved wooden armchair that could have come from a throne room, Canelli looked lumpy and ill at ease. He was wearing run-over shoes, shapeless brown corduroy slacks, and a nylon windbreaker that bulged tight across his stomach.

"Hi, Lieutenant." On his feet, he came toward me. He looked and acted like he'd gone out to buy a six-pack of beer, got caught in a time warp and somehow wandered into the entryway of an English manor house. Obviously, he was awed by his surroundings. His voice was hushed, his eyes round with wonder. As I clipped my plastic identification badge to the lapel of my sports jacket I asked, "How many men have we got on the scene?"

"I'm the only one from our squad," he answered. "There're five uniformed men securing the premises—four patrolmen and Sergeant MacFarland."

"Did you get Alexander Guest's complaint?"

"Yessir." From an inside pocket he withdrew an unsealed envelope containing a single sheet of stationery. Beneath his letterhead, in his own handwriting, Guest stated that he believed Gordon Kramer had murdered Charles Quade inside the Guest house and would so depose. He further stated that Quade had been employed by him to guard said premises. Both Canelli and Sergeant MacFarland had witnessed the statement.

"Good." I put the envelope in my own pocket. "How long has the A.P.B. been on the air?"

"Maybe fifteen minutes."

"Do you have any kind of a time frame for the crime?"

He took a notebook from another pocket, frowned as he thumbed the pages backward and forward, and finally found the entry he wanted. "As near as I can tell, several shots were fired—three shots, at least—just a little after 1:00 A.M. Like, maybe five minutes after. Guest called 911, and the first black-and-white unit was on the scene at about 1:25. They verified

the crime and called Dispatch. The dispatcher called Homicide. I was the only one catching. I got here about ten minutes to two. By that time another black-and-white was on the scene, and the premises were secure. I took a look at the victim. At first I didn't recognize him. That's because he was on his face, see. Then I talked to Guest. Or, more like it, he talked to me."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean that—"

A hallway door opened, revealing John MacFarland, a big, amiable, powerfully built man in his middle fifties, with a ruddy face seamed by twenty years spent riding a motorcycle.

"Hello, Frank."

"Hello, Johnny. How've you been?"

"No complaints." He smiled. "I'm a grandfather. Just a week ago. Sally had a baby boy."

"I know. Kennedy told me. Congratulations."

"Thanks. The coroner's team is here. They want to know whether they can move the body."

"No, they can't. The lab technicians aren't on the scene yet." Inquiringly, I looked at Canelli. He spread his hands and shook his head.

"I called them as soon as I got here, Lieutenant. But it's Friday night, you know. They're out on another call: a wino, dead in a church, if you can believe that. I was just going to tell you."

"Then I don't want anyone within ten feet of the body," I said, speaking to MacFarland. "This one, we've got to do right. Just exactly right."

MacFarland nodded and turned away, closing the hallway door as he went.

"Where were we?" I asked Canelli.

"I was telling you about Guest."

"Where is he, by the way?"

Canelli gestured to a carved oak staircase that curved gracefully up from the central entry hall to the mansion's

second floor. "He's in his bedroom, at the top of those stairs. He says for you to go up and see him."

"Over the phone, he seemed pretty sure of his facts, pretty convinced he had everything figured out. Is that the way he seemed to you?"

"Well—" Canelli frowned as he pressed a forefinger to his pursed lips. "He kind of comes on strong, I guess you'd say. I mean, he's a dynamic personality, no question. But the way it looked to me, he sort of—you know—sized me up, and decided that I wasn't—you know—an officer, or anything. So then he made it pretty plain, see, that he didn't intend to waste his time talking to just anyone."

"Did he accuse Gordon Kramer of the crime when he first talked to you—when you first arrived?"

Canelli shook his head. "No, sir. Not right at first. He said that he knew who did it, though. Then he said that he'd make his statement at the proper time, to the proper person. That's when I decided to call you." As he said it, he looked at me with his soft, anxious brown eyes, obviously still wondering whether he'd done the right thing, calling me. Canelli was the only cop I'd ever known who could constantly get his feelings hurt.

"You were right to phone me, Canelli. No question."

"Oh, Jeez, Lieutenant. I'm sure glad you're not—"

"Come on. Let's take a look at the body. Where is it?"

"Here—back here." He led the way down a wood-paneled hallway and opened an elegantly carved oak door. I was prepared for the smell of violent death: excrement and the sickly sweet stench of drying blood mingling in an odor a policeman never forgets, an odor that constantly lingers in the senses, is never completely purged.

I was facing another hallway, this one narrower, less elaborate, leading straight to the back of the house. Two interior doors were on my left, both of them ajar. To my right, another shorter hallway led to an outside door, also ajar. Through the window of the outside door, bathed in the glare of

police floodlights, I saw the coroner's van parked on a large concrete apron that served a three-car garage.

"It's ahead," Canelli said. "There's another hallway that goes off to your right, back there. That's where he is."

"You stay here. I'll just take a quick look. You didn't touch him, did you?"

"No. I don't think Guest did, either. But I'm not real sure."

Nodding, I walked slowly forward. The first room to my left was a small bedroom, darkened. The second room on the left was larger, also a bedroom. The hallway light was enough to reveal a clutter of children's toys through the half-opened door. Ahead, the hallway made a right angle turn to the right. As I approached the corner, I saw a hand, clenched in death's final agony. Another slow, reluctant step revealed a bare forearm. Then I could see it all: Charlie Quade, sprawled facedown on the parquet wood floor. He'd gotten balder since I'd last seen him, and fatter. He was barefooted, and wore only his undershorts and a tee shirt. He'd bled a lot. Squatting for a closer look, I saw why: One bullet had gone through his neck just below the ear, probably rupturing the jugular vein. The other bullet appeared to have struck him in the shoulder or high on the chest. His eyes were open, staring at my foot. His mouth was open, too. His white, pudgy legs were drawn up close to his body; his torso was twisted. He'd probably suffered before he died. A lot.

I saw a Colt .45 automatic lying about a foot from his hand. I remembered that gun. For their off-duty weapons, most officers choose the smallest, least conspicuous gun possible, usually a short-barreled revolver, easily concealed. Not Charlie. Off duty, he carried the big Colt .45 thrust in his belt, on display. He'd always been a show-off: a blustering, bad-tempered braggart. Guns, money, cars, women—Charlie flashed them all.

Straightening, I looked down the short hallway that led to what seemed to be an outside door, half open. But no light

from the driveway came through the door's small eye-level window.

"Does this door lead to the garage?" I called out.

"That's right," Canelli answered.

I looked a last time at Charlie Quade, then joined Canelli, standing exactly where I'd left him. I pointed to the first bedroom door. "Was Charlie sleeping in there?"

"I guesso." He pointed to the second door. "That's the boy's room, I know. Guest's grandson, as nearly as I can make out."

We were standing within a few feet of the outside door that opened on the floodlit concrete apron of the garage. Over Canelli's shoulder I saw the crime lab's van pull to a stop beside the coroner's wagon. I pointed. "There's the crime lab. Finally. You stay with them until they're finished—until they've got everything they want. And I mean everything. I want you to keep looking over their shoulders. Clear?" I looked him in the eye, hard.

"Yessir." He nodded diligently "That's clear."

"When you're satisfied—good and satisfied—you can authorize the removal of the body, on my authority. If you've got any questions I'll be upstairs, talking to Guest."

He nodded again. "Yessir."

"I want everyone—*everyone*—to realize that this isn't the Tenderloin. And Alexander Guest isn't their friendly local pimp. Charlie Quade was apparently working for Guest. Which automatically makes this whole thing important. If we make any mistakes, Guest could make us pay. Through the nose."

Canelli started to smile, then decided to frown earnestly as he nodded vigorous agreement.

THREE

THE WALLS BESIDE THE CURVING CENTRAL STAIRCASE WERE hung with large, elaborately framed oil paintings, most of them landscapes. At the top of the staircase, I stood facing yet another English style oak door. From behind the door I heard the sound of someone talking. I stepped closer, listened for a moment, then knocked.

"Yes?" It was a loud, authoritative voice, unmistakably Alexander Guest's.

"It's Lieutenant Hastings, Mr. Guest. Frank Hastings. Homicide."

"Come in."

Like the rest of the mansion, the master bedroom reproduced an English manor house, with paneled walls, high ceilings, parquet floors and gracefully carved decorative woodwork. Even the huge, strictly American plate glass window that commanded a spectacular view of the Golden Gate Bridge was framed in carved wood, with small, square stained glass panes bordering the plate glass.

Alexander Guest sat behind an ornate leather-topped table with carved lion-claw legs. The table served as a luxurious desk. He waved me to a nearby armchair, then half turned away from me, continuing to talk into the phone.

"Yes, yes." Impatiently he gesticulated with his free hand, as if he were angry with the caller for not comprehending. "There's a ranking officer here now—finally." As he said it, he glanced at me sharply. Plainly, Alexander Guest resented the time he'd been compelled to spend with underlings before I arrived on the scene. "He's just come into the room, in fact. I'll—what?" Obviously still exasperated, gnawing his lower lip and shaking his head, he paused, gracelessly enduring whatever the other person was saying. Finally, speaking with exaggerated patience, as if he were dealing with an uncomprehending child, or an inattentive adult, he said, "Marie, I've told you what I want you to do. I want you to stay where you are. I want you and Durkin to stay together, in the same room. Durkin will protect you. That's his job, to protect you. There's an officer here now, as I said, someone with authority. I'm sure he'll approve a guard for you, as soon as he knows the details. In the meantime, though, you stay there, with Durkin. It's odds on, certainly, that Gordon's trying to get away. He might've succeeded by now, for all we know. So I don't think you're in danger. But, still, there's no point in— What?" He listened for another ill-tempered moment, then apparently broke in, saying, "Marie, I've got to go. The sooner I talk to Lieutenant Hastings, the sooner things will fall into place. You just do as I tell you. I'll call you as soon as I'm free." Abruptly, he cradled the phone and turned to face me.

Because I'd seen his picture so often, Guest's face seemed familiar, like the face of a movie star seen on the street. He looked to be in his early sixties. His body was lean and muscular: an athlete's body, taut and trim. Alexander Guest was one of those restless, intense men who conveyed a sense of constant movement and tension, even sitting behind a desk. His gray hair was thick and wiry, growing low across his forehead, elegantly barbered. His face, like his body, was lean and vigorous, deeply creased down the cheeks and around the mouth. His nose was large and high bridged. His eyes were a clear gray, almost transparent. The eyes dominated the face: quick moving, shrewd, unsmiling, uncompromising. He looked

like an actor perfectly cast in the role Alexander Guest played in real life: an incredibly successful trial lawyer, a living legend with an international reputation as a brilliant, ruthless winner. A gossip columnist had recently written that Guest never accepted clients unless their names appeared in *Who's Who.*

Immediately, he went on the offensive. "Have you gotten anything on your bulletin to have Kramer picked up?"

"No, sir."

"Have you got men at all the airports? They should be covering Oakland and San Jose, too, as well as San Francisco—any airport that makes connections to New York."

"Did you tell that to Inspector Canelli?"

"Certainly," he snapped.

I looked at my watch; the time was 3:15, almost exactly two hours since the murder. Assuming that he'd committed the crime at 1:10 A.M., Gordon Kramer couldn't have gotten to San Francisco International, the closest airport, before 1:45. By 2:45, probably, the airport police would have been alerted. We'd have to check the airline schedules to be sure, but I doubted whether any airline would leave San Francisco for New York before, say, 6:00 A.M. So it seemed probable that we had a better-than-even chance of apprehending the fugitive, assuming that he and his son were forced to wait for a flight out of town. In the wee hours, a man and a boy in a deserted airline terminal would be hard to miss.

"Do you have any reason to believe that he's going directly to New York?" I asked. "If he's a fugitive, and he's smart, he'd go somewhere else first. Los Angeles, for instance, or Portland. He'd want to get out of San Francisco as soon as possible. Once he does that, he can take his time going on to New York."

"Well," Guest said, "he's a fugitive, no question. And, sure as hell, he's smart." His voice was flat and furious; his eyes were stone cold.

"What I'd like," I said, taking out my notebook and ballpoint pen, "is for you to fill me in. Give me everything you can

think of, from the beginning—everything that's relevant to the crime."

"Yes -certainly." Suddenly, as if his body couldn't contain its own instant burst of energy, he rose to his feet. Wearing a plaid woolen bathrobe over paisley-printed silk pajamas, he began pacing back and forth behind the intricately carved table.

"It all started," he said, "almost seven years ago, when my daughter Marie—" He gestured to the phone. It was a short, resentful gesture, as if he were releasing a charge of sudden anger. "Marie married Gordon Kramer, in New York. She'd been married once before. In fact, she'd gone to New York to live for a while, to forget her first husband. Unfortunately, however, she met Kramer almost immediately, and in just a few months they got married, at City Hall, naturally. Secretly. Or, at least, surreptitiously, as if the marriage were a shameful secret. They lived in New York until John, their son, was almost two years old. Then they came to San Francisco. Kramer—I never think of him as Gordon—was in venture capital. He had his own business in New York, or so he said. I was able to help him get established here, and within two years after his arrival in San Francisco he'd made many advantageous conections, thanks to my efforts.

"But then, unhappily, the marriage started to come apart. And, to be fair, I can't claim it was entirely Kramer's fault. Because, in fact—" He broke stride, stood motionless for a moment. I saw his shoulders sag and his head lower, as if his sharp, restless vitality had suddenly deserted him. "In fact, even during her first marriage, Marie began to drink." Plainly weary now, he resumed his seat. "I thought having a baby might help, but it didn't. Just the opposite proved to be the case. Postpartum depression aggravated the problem. And then there was Kramer—" His eyes hardened, his voice sharpened vindictively. I was aware of a pattern developing. Talking about his daughter or his grandson, Guest's manner softened. But when he talked about Gordon Kramer, anger took over.

"During the whole of his marriage, Kramer was seeing other women. Lots of other women. And when he and Marie moved here, his philandering continued, got worse, in fact. Until, finally, he became so blatant about it that we had no choice but to take action." He began reflectively twirling an antique silver letter opener with his long, expressive fingers as he looked me squarely in the eye. Obviously, he was evaluating me, deciding how much he should tell me. Finally he said, "To be perfectly candid, Lieutenant, we made a deal, Kramer and I. If he would agree to a divorce, agree to go back to New York, or wherever, and if he would agree not to bother either Marie or John, I'd agree to a nominal settlement—even though, God knows, the court would never have given him anything. The point being, I wanted him out of our lives. For good."

"Did he have visitation rights, after the divorce?"

He nodded. "Yes. It was just too much trouble to eliminate visitation. The courts, you know, will almost always grant visitation, and Kramer's lawyer wasn't about to yield the point, doubtless because he could see some profit to his career, successfully opposing me in divorce proceedings. It's like gun fighting in the old west, making a reputation by going against someone important. So, as I said, Kramer and I made a separate deal, privately. He agreed to stay away from both Marie and John. And I agreed to—certain other things."

"Then he broke his word. Is that it?"

He waved aside the question with a sharp, impatient chop of his hand. Talking about Kramer, Guest's angry vitality had returned. "Yes, he broke his word. But that's another story. It's a long story, and it's irrelevant, at least for the moment. After all, it's three o'clock in the morning. And we're still doing background." He eyed me coldly, as if to imply that he shouldn't have to tell me how to conduct my own interrogation. "Suffice it to say I had a lot of incriminating information on Gordon Kramer—information that had nothing whatever to do with his goddam philandering." He broke off, frowning down at the silver letter opener, his expression implacable,

inscrutable. Then: "For a while the deal held. But, two years ago, Kramer got remarried. And for whatever reason, he apparently decided that he wanted John. So a year ago, he began taking measures."

"He wanted the boy permanently, you mean? Or did he want to visit him?"

"It began with visitations. Of course, I objected. He was breaking our private agreement. In response, he initiated custody proceedings, naming Marie an unfit parent. I threatened retaliation, of course. I've already told you I had information that would incriminate him. I threatened to use it."

"What was the nature of that information?"

"I don't want to go into that," he snapped. "There's no need, now. Everything's changed. Obviously. Besides, using that information was the expedient of last resort. Initially, there was an easier, less complicated answer to his custody suit."

"What was that?"

He looked at me silently for a moment, signifying that he was about to take me into his confidence—a confidence that I would be wise to respect.

"I simply arranged for the court proceedings to be delayed."

"For how long?"

"Two years, probably. The first court date was about a year in the future, if I recall correctly."

"And you could've continued to get postponements. For years."

He made no reply, but his silence was eloquent.

"And, in the meantime," I said, "Kramer was aware that you also threatened him with possible action on the incriminating information you held against him."

"That's correct."

"You had him pretty much backed into a corner."

"Right." He said it with obvious satisfaction. Alexander Guest wasn't a man to show an enemy mercy.

"So he decided to steal his son, take him away. Tonight."

He nodded: a slow, ominous inclination of his head. "Yes."

"What happened here tonight, Mr. Guest? Can you give me a rundown?"

As if to organize his thoughts, he sat silently for a moment, still absently fingering the silver letter opener. Then, drawing a deep breath, he began speaking in a deliberate, precisely measured voice.

"To understand what happened," he said, "you must understand that, during the past year, I've made it my business to know something of Kramer's activities. And, in the process, I was warned that he intended to get John and take him away, possibly abroad. And I was determined—absolutely determined—that it would never happen. Not only would he ruin Marie's life, probably, but he'd also ruin my life, too. I've been married three times—and divorced three times. I've learned my lesson. I'm not suited to marriage, and I'm not going to try it again. I have—had—two children. My son Alex was killed when he was twenty. And Marie—well—" He shook his head. "In some respects, Marie is lost to me, lost to herself. So that leaves John. He's my only grandson, the only thing left to me that really counts. Do you understand?" He asked the question sharply, suddenly, as if to dispel any suggestion that his affection for John was a bid for sympathy, or a confession of weakness. Alexander Guest wasn't taking me into his confidence. He was sorting matters out, giving me the facts he'd decided I'd need if I was to help him solve his problem.

I nodded. "I understand."

"Are you a family man? Do you have children?"

"I have two children. Teenagers."

"Then you can appreciate my position."

"Yes."

Apparently satisfied that he'd made his point, he continued in the same brisk, precise voice, as if he were summarizing for a jury.

"Kramer's first attempt to get John involved a third

party, and it was unsuccessful. I won't go into the details, because they aren't germane. But, suffice it to say, I was warned. I hired a man to guard Marie and John, at their home. And I also hired Quade, to help me."

I frowned. "Help you?"

"John spends a lot of time with me, especially on weekends. Once I learned of Kramer's intentions, I naturally wanted protection. For John, and for myself, too."

"So Quade stayed here, whenever John was with you."

"That's correct."

"Is there anyone else living in the house?"

"I have a couple. She does the cooking and housekeeping. He drives for me and helps around the house. They live over the garage. They're away for the weekend."

"So just the three of you were in the house tonight." As I spoke, I opened my notebook and put it on a corner of the desk. It was time to get the details down on paper.

"Yes."

"What I'd like," I said, "is for you to give me a rundown on what happened. Give me anything that's relevant, anything at all. And give it to me in sequence, please. I'll especially need the time everything happened. As precisely as possible."

"Of course. I understand. In fact—" He put the letter opener aside, and took a sheet of paper from a drawer, at the same time reaching for a pair of horn-rimmed glasses. I've made some notes. I knew you'd need them." Consulting the paper, he recited:

"Marie and I had arranged that John would stay with me for the weekend. That's our usual arrangement. And, as usual, I picked John up at Marie's house after I finished at my office, about four o'clock. I took John for an ice cream cone, and bought him a toy. Then we had dinner—a hamburger, actually, at Hamburger Heaven. We arrived here about seven o'clock. Quade was already here, by prearrangement."

"How long had Quade been working for you and John as a bodyguard?"

"Ever since I learned that Kramer intended to steal John. That would be about four months ago."

"Did anyone guard John except Quade, when John stayed with you?"

"No."

"Did Quade work for you at other times?"

He frowned. "I'm not sure what you mean."

"I mean, did he do anything except guard John—work for you in any other capacity?"

He hesitated, then said, "No."

"So you hired Quade almost every weekend for about four months. Is that it?"

"Yes."

I nodded, and waited for him to consult his notes. "Clara and Fred—my servants—left about eight this evening. Or, rather, last evening, technically. They won't be back until Sunday afternoon. John and I watched TV until about ten, when he went to bed."

"What was Quade doing while the two of you watched TV?"

"As far as I know, he was watching TV, too, in his own room. He was there when John went to bed, in any case."

"You saw him."

"I didn't actually *see* him. But I heard him. Before I put John to bed I knocked on Quade's door, and told him that John was going to sleep. He acknowledged what I'd said, and turned his TV off. So I knew he was there, even though I didn't actually see him."

"As I understand the layout of your house, there're only two bedrooms on the ground floor. Is that right?"

He nodded. "Yes. Two small adjoining bedrooms, at the back of the house. There's a bath back there, too, and the laundry room. Originally they were servant's quarters, but the space over the garage is better for a couple, more private. There's more room, too. And a view."

"I was wondering—" I hesitated, considering how best to put the question.

"Yes?" He spoke impatiently, frowning. Plainly, Guest had no time for other people's indecision.

"Well—those two bedrooms seem to be pretty isolated, there at the back of the house. They don't seem very secure, as nearly as I can see. There's one door that leads into the area from the garage, and another door that leads directly outside, to the driveway."

"You're wondering why I put John there, in view of the fact that he might be kidnapped. Is that what you're saying?"

"Yes, sir. I'd think he'd have been safer here on the second floor."

"That's probably true. But there's more to life than security, Lieutenant. That's John's room. It's part of his identity, perhaps a very important part. And I don't propose that he begin his life by surrendering his freedom to the possibility of danger. Did you see his room, look inside?"

"Just a glance."

"Well, as you'll see, it's decorated for him. He's comfortable there. It's *his* room. And, after all, Quade was there, on guard. And, in addition—" He swiveled in his chair, and pointed to an elaborate communications panel set into the wall beside his desk. The brushed satin-chrome knobs and green-glowing dials and digital displays looked incongruous against the bedroom's old-English paneling. "There're three microphones, in John's room. There's a speaker, too. I can hear a pin drop, in that room. Or so I thought."

"Did you hear anything tonight?"

"I'm not really sure," he answered. "Something woke me up, certainly. I was awake, in any case, before I heard the shots. So I assume I heard something. But, unfortunately, I'm rather a heavy sleeper."

"Do you have electronic security? A burglar alarm system?"

"Of course."

"Is it wired to this panel?"

"This panel and others. There're several panels

throughout the house. And, in addition, the burglar alarm activates a loud bell, naturally."

"Did the alarm sound tonight?"

"No," he answered. "At least, not that I heard."

"Did you set the alarm system before you went to bed?"

"I never set it. Fred—my driver—sets it when he's here. And Quade sets it, too, when he's here."

"So you aren't sure whether the alarm was set tonight."

He waved an impatient, long-suffering hand. "No, I'm not sure, Lieutenant. And, obviously, Quade can't tell us, can he?"

I wrote 'Alarm Set?' in my notebook, then asked him to continue.

"As soon as I got John settled," he said, "I turned out the lights, and locked up, and came up here, to my bedroom. I got into bed, and read until about 11:30, I'd say, at which time I turned out the lights. The next thing I knew, I was awake. And I remember feeling a sense of foreboding, that something was wrong. Probably I'd heard something from John's room—voices, perhaps. But it certainly wasn't anything specific. I remember looking at the clock. The time was just a little after one o'clock—five minutes after, perhaps. I sat up in bed, and listened. I thought I heard something—some very faint sound, from downstairs, or possibly from the garage. So I got out of bed, and went to the window—" He gestured to the huge plate glass window, with its spectacular view of the Golden Gate Bridge. Slow-moving auto headlights traversed the bridge: animated jewels, inching through the darkness.

"From there," he said, "you can see the garage, and most of the driveway." He paused, looking at me expectantly. As a lawyer, he knew what I should do now. So I got to my feet and went to the window. Standing close to the glass and looking down at the sharpest possible angle, I could see most of the large garage, with its three overhead doors and its single small access door. I could only see about half of the driveway, front to back; the other half, closest to the house, was cut off by the ledge of the bedroom window. I could see

almost all of the concrete apron that connected the driveway to the garage. As I returned to my chair, Guest continued.

"I stood there for perhaps a minute. I didn't see anything, or hear anything. So I went back to my bed. I'd just gotten under the covers, and was settling myself, when—" He sharply shook his head, as if the memory of what happened next caused him physical pain. "When I heard shots. I—I guess I was frozen for a few seconds. Then I heard voices from outside, on the driveway. So I went to the window, just in time to catch a glimpse of Kramer—and John. He had John by the hand, and he was pulling him, half running, toward the sidewalk, in front of the house."

"Would you mind showing me exactly where you stood, and where Kramer stood on the driveway, when you first saw him?"

"Certainly not." He rose to his feet, and walked to the window. His movements were vigorous and decisive, as if he'd regained his earlier vigor. "I stood here, and the two of them were there—" He pointed down to the driveway—"just about even with the rear of that white station wagon, there."

"Was there enough light for you to recognize Kramer? The area's brightly lit now. What about earlier, when you saw him?"

"There was less light than there is now, obviously. But it was enough. There's always an outside light burning, plus the streetlamp, just at the end of the driveway. Besides—obviously—both of them were known to me." Impatiently, he shook his head. "No, there's no question. None at all."

As we returned to our chairs I asked, "What happened then?"

"They disappeared from my view," he answered. "Then, just a few seconds later, I heard a car start, out on the street. Obviously it was Kramer, escaping with John."

"What happened next?"

"I got my gun, and I went downstairs."

"What kind of a gun do you have, Mr. Guest?"

"It's a .357 Magnum."

"May I see it?"

"Certainly." He pushed himself back from the table, opened a drawer and took out a revolver. He handled it carefully and confidently, as if he'd had experience with firearms. I swung out the cylinder and saw five unfired cartridges in the chambers. The hammer had been resting on an empty chamber, standard procedure in law enforcement and the military. I sniffed the barrel, swung the cylinder back into place and handed the gun to Guest. He replaced it in the drawer without commment.

"You got your gun," I prompted.

"Yes. Then I went downstairs—very apprehensively, I don't mind telling you. And I found Quade lying in the hallway."

"Describe how you found him—what you saw."

"Well, he was lying in the back hallway, the one that leads from the two bedrooms to the garage." Guest looked at me. "You've seen him, haven't you?"

"I'd like to hear your description."

A small smile touched the corners of his mouth. It was a humorless smile, a knowing smile. "The policeman at work," he said.

I didn't reply, didn't return his smile.

Still amused, his manner became patronizingly supercilious as he said, "I must say, I didn't expect to be questioned as if I were a suspect. Not in my own bedroom."

I'd often been forced to endure the hostility of important, affluent citizens who resented being interrogated. I'd discovered that silence and a steady, noncommittal stare were the only responses that worked. As his sardonic smile faded, we sat silently, our eyes locked. Then, speaking with icy calm, he said, "I found him facedown. It was obvious that he was dead. His gun—a Colt .45 automatic—was lying about four feet from his right hand."

"Did you touch him?"

"No."

"Then how'd you know he was dead?"

"I didn't know for certain, not then. However, I was in the Marine Corps during the Second World War. I was a platoon leader on Okinawa and Saipan. I know a dead man when I see one. I know how they look, and I know how they smell. And I know a Colt .45 when I see one, too. That's the sidearm I carried, in the Marines. I could still field strip one. Blindfolded." With his cold gray eyes still boring hard into mine, he let a moment of uncompromising silence pass. Then, still icy-calm, he said, "I didn't linger over the body for long. Not initially. I'd noticed that both the door to the garage and the driveway were ajar, and I wanted to reconnoiter. I looked outside—cautiously. I didn't see anyone. So I went back into the kitchen, and called you—the police. And you know the rest." He let a subtly sarcastic beat pass, then added, "Hopefully."

Ignoring the barb, I asked, "Were the lights on in the hallway when you first arrived on the scene?"

He shook his head. "No. There were no lights on anywhere. But there was enough light coming from the hallway window to let me see Quade on the floor—enough light for me to recognize him, and to be pretty certain he was dead."

"Did you turn the lights on?"

"Not immediately. First I reconnoitered, as I said. When I was satisfied Kramer was gone—really gone—I turned on the light and examined Quade. Then I went to the phone."

"Did you leave the hallway light on?"

"I'm not sure. After all, I was rattled, to say the least. But I imagine I left it on."

I nodded, glancing over my notes. "If you'd care to do it, Mr. Guest, I'd be interested in hearing your theory."

"My theory?"

"What do you think happened? Why? In what sequence?"

"Well—" He shrugged. "I think it's pretty obvious, what happened. Kramer was probably staking out the house, as you people say. He was probably parked on the street, watching. About one o'clock, he decided to make his move. He

came down the driveway to the garage, and entered the garage through the service door. From the garage, he went through another door to the rear hallway of the house. He went into John's room and got the boy up and dressed. That's the point at which I woke up—probably when the intercom picked up their voices. They went out into the hallway and turned right, past Quade's door. At that point, Quade probably awakened. Shots were fired, and Quade went down. Kramer and John escaped through the side door that leads to the driveway. That's when I saw them. They got into a car, and drove away, probably to the airport."

"You've said several times that you think they drove directly to the airport. Why? A man and a boy in an airport at 2 A.M. would be pretty conspicuous, it seems to me."

"True. As a murder suspect, Kramer would be conspicuous, traveling with a child in the wee hours. But he hadn't intended to commit murder. He'd only intended to steal John, there's no doubt about that. And, as you well know, the police don't go after a father stealing his own son. It just doesn't happen, at least, not without a court order. So Kramer wouldn't have worried about being conspicuous. Not until it was too late. Concealment wouldn't have been part of his original plan. And, obviously, he wouldn't have been able to make contingency plans while he was escaping. He'd simply have run—blindly. He'd either drive to an airport, it seems to me, or he'd drive out of town. We can't cover the roads. It's too late for that. But we *can* cover the airports."

I nodded, conceding the point. Then: "You say you have a burglar alarm, which Quade was supposed to have set. Why didn't you check to see whether it was set before you went to bed?"

"I don't know. I just didn't do it. And, frankly, if I had checked, I might not've known whether it was set or not, I'm afraid. I'm one of those men who don't get along with machines—or electronics. All those circuits, and lights, and switches—" He shook his head. "They're too much for me."

"Assuming that the alarm was set, how could Kramer have gotten in without tripping the alarm?"

"I'm afraid," he said ruefully, "that it was probably very simple. My two servants are notorious for locking themselves out of the house. It used to be a source of constant irritation. The solution was to stash two keys, one for the door leading into the garage from the driveway, the other leading from the garage to the house. If Kramer knew of those two keys, he'd have had no problem."

"Do you think he did know about them?"

"I don't know. But Marie knew about them, and so did John. Kramer could conceivably have found out from either of them."

"I'd think, if you were worried about John being stolen, that you'd have moved those two keys."

He shrugged. "Obviously, now, I wish I had. However, I've always made it a rule not to dwell on what might have been. It's a waste of time and energy."

"I'm sure you're right." I looked at my notes again. "You say that Kramer and John appeared on the driveway just after the shots were fired."

"That's correct."

"How long after?"

He shrugged, irritated. It was obvious that Guest didn't like to be pinned down, questioned too closely. "I'm not sure. Twenty, thirty seconds, perhaps. No more."

"The timing would have squared with the time frame you're suggesting, in other words."

He frowned. "Time frame?"

"The shots were fired, and Kramer appeared at such a time that made it logical to assume he'd fired the shots."

He nodded decisively. "Absolutely. No question."

"How many shots were fired?"

"There were four shots."

"Are you sure? Were you awake enough to be sure?"

"Lieutenant, I've already told you—" Exasperated, he shook his head, once more the arrogant, supercilious celebrity,

forced to waste his valuable time answering a civil servant's plodding questions. "I was awake—fully awake—when the shots were fired. And there were four shots. *Four.*"

"Did they come all together?"

"No. There was one shot. Then maybe two seconds elapsed. Then the other three shots followed. And then—"

His telephone rang. He lifted the receiver, listened for a moment, then passed the phone to me. "It's the police dispatcher," he said.

"Lieutenant Hastings."

"Yessir. This is Cassiday."

"Hello, Cassiday. What is it?"

"On the A.P.B. you authorized on Gordon Kramer, a white male, age thirty-six, believed to be traveling with John Kramer, male, six years old."

"Have they been picked up?"

"Yessir. They're in custody over in Oakland. They were picked up at the airport, there, about twenty minutes ago."

FOUR

"YOU LOOK TERRIBLE," FRIEDMAN SAID.

"I had about three hours sleep last night. At the most."

He slipped the cellophane wrapper from his morning cigar, made a tight ball between his thumb and forefinger and sailed the ball into my wastebasket. Even though his fingers were thick and stubby, Friedman used his hands with remarkable delicacy.

"Give me the rundown on Charlie Quade, will you?" Friedman asked. "Canelli was going to oblige me, but I didn't feel strong enough to sit through it. I didn't get much sleep either, last night."

As concisely as I could, I gave him the details. While I talked, glancing occasionally at my notes, Friedman went through his cigar-lighting ritual. The routine never varied. Lolling belly-up in my visitor's chair, he shifted from one sizable ham to the other, grunting as he searched his pockets for matches. Once he'd found the matches, and had the cigar lit to his satisfaction, he shook out the match and sailed it, still smoking, into my wastebasket. For the first year or two we'd worked as co-lieutenants in charge of Homicide I'd dreaded the possibility that he'd start a fire. Lately, though, I'd begun to change my mind. I'd never seen Friedman rattled, even

when he faced mortal danger. So the prospect of watching him deal with a fire he'd started in my wastebasket gradually became more intriguing.

The cigar ash was an inch long before my bare-bones summary of the case was finished. As Friedman took the cigar from his mouth, the ash fell unheeded on his vest. "Poor Charlie. He was always a loser. When he was a child, I'll bet he got chased home from school every day. Have they done an autopsy yet?"

"Not yet. But the coroner called just a few minutes ago to say that there were two wounds. One broke the right collarbone. The other entered the neck just below the left ear. It ruptured the carotid artery and lodged in the spine. That was the fatal shot, obviously."

"What about the lab reports?"

I gestured to the clock. "It's only ten o'clock in the morning—and a Saturday morning, at that. Besides, the technicians are still on the scene. According to Guest's testimony, four shots were fired. Two .45 shell casings were found, indicating that Quade fired twice. A .45 bullet was found in the wall, but they haven't found the second bullet. They're still looking."

"It's not in Gordon Kramer, then."

"No."

"Where's Kramer now?"

"He's downstairs in Interrogation. He's ready when we are."

Friedman nodded, drew slowly on his cigar, blew a neat, plump smoke ring lazily toward the ceiling of my office. Even though it was Saturday, he wore a three-piece suit, with collar and tie. But, as always, the suit's jacket and trousers were badly wrinkled, and the vest was smudged with cigar ash, hastily brushed away. His tie was askew, his collar was mashed by a sizable double chin. Friedman's face, like Canelli's, was broad and swarthy. His nose was undistinguished. His mouth was perpetually pursed in a small, subtle smile that sometimes seemed smug, therefore sometimes seemed irritat-

ing. His pepper-and-salt hair was thick, haphazardly combed. Beneath heavy lids, his dark, shrewd eyes noticed everything, revealed nothing. Reclining at his ease in my visitor's chair, Friedman was playing the part he liked best: the squad room sage, as inscrutable as a Buddha.

"There're two things that puzzle me about all this," he said finally.

"Like what?"

"Like, first, how does a custody dispute turn into murder? And, second, how well does Alexander Guest come off as the doting grandfather? By all reports, the man's heartless. He's a people-eater. An egomaniac."

"He doesn't have a wife, and his daughter is an alcoholic. Unless I'm mistaken, John Kramer might be his only other living relative. He just doesn't have anyone else."

He shrugged, waving the cigar in a dubious arc. "That answers the second question, maybe. But what about the first question? How did child stealing come down to murder?"

"Kramer's waiting for us," I said. "Why don't we ask him?"

By departmental tradition, interrogation room "A" was reserved for our most important cases. Therefore, the short corridor leading to "A" was kept under a kind of informal surveillance by the city's crime reporters, alternating shifts. As Friedman and I turned into the corridor, Dan Carter, the *Sentinel*'s veteran crime reporter, stepped in front of us. At age sixty-two, Carter was a vintage type: tough-talking, cynical, shrewd, secretly sympathetic to the human wreckage whose problems translated into paychecks for Carter, Friedman, and myself. Carter could write better than any reporter I'd ever known. In his thirty years on the *Sentinel*, he'd won every prize but the Pulitzer.

"Is that the one who shot Charlie Quade?" Carter asked, jerking his chin down the hallway. He was a small, skinny man, totally bald, with a long, mournful-looking nose

and a bulging forehead. His voice, like his manners, was often abrasive.

"We don't know yet," Friedman answered. "Ask us when we come out."

"I will," Carter answered. "Believe me, I will."

We checked our revolvers with the sergeant on duty, and nodded to the uniformed patrolman guarding the entrance to interrogation room "A." As long as we were inside, he would keep watch through the small wire-mesh window set into the steel slab door.

Kramer was seated on the prisoner's side of a small metal table. He was a "medium man": Medium height, medium weight, medium age. His features were regular: well-shaped nose and jaw, broad forehead, alert eyes, firm mouth. He was dressed casually in flannel slacks, a maroon turtleneck shirt, and a herringbone sports jacket that looked expensive. His haircut looked expensive, too, and so did his high-style glasses. If he hadn't slept in his clothes, and if he'd shaved, he'd look exactly like the character he probably played to perfection: the intelligent, confident, successful young executive.

Friedman and I identified ourselves and sat facing him across the steel table. As I put my notebook and pen on the table, Friedman asked Kramer whether he'd made the two phone calls he was allowed.

"I made one call," he answered. "I called my wife."

"Is she here? In San Francisco?"

"She's in New York. But she'll be here tomorrow. She's bringing a lawyer." He spoke evenly, in a low, tight voice. His eyes were steady, his mouth was hard, his lips were compressed. Obviously, he wasn't intimidated, wasn't frightened. As I watched him, I realized that I didn't know how much he'd been told, didn't know whether the charge had been child stealing or homicide. I wondered whether Friedman knew, whether he'd read the arresting officer's report, and the booking sergeant's statement. Knowing Friedman, I doubted it. He hated paperwork, hated to read reports.

"Was your wife standing by?" Friedman asked. "In case of trouble?"

Kramer looked at Friedman for a moment, his expression calm, coldly calculating. Then he asked, "Where's my son? Where's John?"

"He was taken to the Youth Guidance Center," I answered. "Just about now, his grandfather will be picking him up."

"His grandfather." He said it as if he were pronouncing an obscenity.

"Why'd you do it, Mr. Kramer?" I asked. "Will you tell us?"

He transferred his angry gaze to me. "It should be obvious why I did it. I did it because Alexander Guest and his daughter cheated me out of my son. So I took matters into my own hands."

"You took your son away from your father-in-law's house," Friedman said. "And when the bodyguard Guest hired tried to interfere, you shot him. Is that the way it happened?"

The suspect blinked. "I—what?" His eyes were fierce, locked with Friedman's. "*What?*"

"You shot him," Friedman said. "You shot him and killed him."

A spasm tugged at Kramer's face. His eyes momentarily faltered; his mouth twitched at the corners. Was it fear? Guilt? Both?

Friedman and I silently watched the suspect as he struggled for self-control, struggled to conceal the fear that tore at his face as comprehension dawned.

"Those shots . . ." he mused. "It was those shots that I heard. That's why I'm here, why I was arrested."

He'd answered my question, then. Without doubt, he'd been charged with child stealing, the lesser offense. Good: Friedman and I had surprise on our side.

"You're here," I said, "because, officially, you're being held as a material witness to the murder of Charles Quade."

"But that could change," Friedman said softly, on cue.

"Depending on what you tell us, or don't tell us, the D.A. could very easily change the charge to murder. So, for you, the next few minutes could be very important. A matter of life and death, in fact."

Also on cue, I turned to Friedman. "He could probably cop second degree murder, though. That's assuming that Quade fired at him."

Friedman nodded judiciously. "That's true." He turned to Kramer. "You could plead self-defense. As Frank says, the evidence is in your favor. Especially if Quade fired first."

"If you'd like," I said, "We'll talk to the D.A. about it, see what he says."

"Just tell us how it went," Friedman urged. "Give it to us from the top. Tell the truth, and you'll be doing yourself a big favor."

"You'll be doing the D.A. a favor, too," I said. "And he doesn't forget favors. Believe me. You can make him look good. Very good. And he won't forget it."

As we went through the standard routine, I watched Kramer's expression change. It was the usual range of interrogation room emotions: amazement, real or fake, followed by indignation, real or faked, followed by transparent apprehension, intended to convey his fear that, despite his innocence, we were railroading him onto death row.

But Kramer was cooler than most. He waited for us to finish our routine. Then, speaking in a low, distinct voice, he said, "I didn't shoot anyone—last night, or ever. I don't have a gun. You—you're framing me. You've talked to Guest. He's done this—framed me."

"I talked to Guest," I said, nodding. "That's true. And, yes, you're right. He accused you of murdering Charles Quade."

Kramer licked his lips. "Charles Quade is the bodyguard. Is, is that right?"

"He was the bodyguard," I said softly. "He's dead now. Remember?"

"But, Christ, I—"

"Why don't you tell us what happened last night?" Friedman asked genially, trying to settle his two hundred forty pounds more comfortably on his hard metal chair. "We haven't let him talk," he said to me, waving a pudgy hand. "We've been doing all the talking."

"What about it, Kramer?" I asked. "Will you tell us what happened yesterday? You don't have to say anything, though. You don't have to say a word, without your lawyer being present." I paused, emphasizing the crucial legality of the statement. Then I said, "But if you're innocent, you've got nothing to lose."

"And everything to gain," Friedman put in.

Kramer snorted: a rueful, contemptuous sound. "Do you expect me to believe that?"

Friedman shrugged, disarmingly spreading his hands wide across the table. "You help us, we'll help you. It's as simple as that. You look to me like someone who's been around. You should know how it works. You help us, we appreciate it. Everyone profits."

"And who helps Alexander Guest? Everyone else? Everyone else in the whole goddam world?"

"Guest has accused you of murdering Charles Quade at approximately five minutes after one this morning, September twenty-first." As I said it, I unconsciously lifted my chin, mindful of the microphone built into the room's single light fixture, directly above us. Because we'd decided not to caution the suspect that he was being recorded, the tape couldn't be used as evidence. But, to the D.A.'s office, the recording of the interrogation would be an important tool.

"Acting on Alexander Guest's written statement," I said, "which was witnessed by two policemen, we picked you up. We found you exactly where Alexander Guest said you'd be—at the airport, with two tickets in your pocket. That's a pretty powerful point in his favor."

"So, to defend yourself against Guest's accusations," Friedman said, "you've got to tell us what happened. You've

got to give us your version. Otherwise, as nearly as I can see, you're screwed. Badly, permanently screwed."

Kramer's eyes had fallen. The twitching at the corners of his mouth was spasmodic now, constant. His voice was dogged, dull. "I've got nothing to hide. Nothing at all."

"Then tell us what happened," I said. "Tell us everything. From the top."

Kramer raised his eyes, looked at me for a long, haunted moment. Then, slowly, he shook his head. "I'm so tired," he muttered. "I didn't sleep all night."

Friedman and I exchanged a covert glance. Instinctively, we felt that this confidence—this admission of confusion—was critically important. Tentatively, the suspect was trusting us with a small confession. He was testing us, making his decision. He was deciding whether to cooperate, whether he thought we'd do as we promised, and help him, if he told us his story. This was the moment that could make the interrogation—make it, or break it.

The silence lengthened. Then, once again, Kramer began shaking his head. At the same time, his face changed. It was as if some crucial circuit that controlled his facial muscles had suddenly malfunctioned. In seconds, his calm executive's assurance disappeared, replaced by pain, and uncertainty, and fear, each emotion on painful display, beyond his conscious control. Gordon Kramer was ready to talk.

"At first," he said, staring down at the table in front of him, "I was going to have it done. I was going to hire Lester Bennett." With an effort, he raised his eyes to mine, inquiringly. I nodded. Yes, I knew Lester Bennett. He was a local private investigator with an elegant penthouse, an expensive live-in boyfriend, a pair of his-and-his Porsches—and absolutely no ethics.

"But Bennett decided not to do it," Kramer said, speaking faster now, more precisely. Having committed himself to telling his story, he wanted to get through it as quickly as possible. "And I didn't know of anyone else. So I decided to do it myself. I wasn't going to trust just anyone—a hack,

who'd botch the job. I flew here from New York on Wednesday. I rented a car, and began watching Marie and John. I already knew that, almost always, Guest takes John for the weekend, while Marie goes cruising."

"Cruising?"

"For men," he said bitterly. "Any man. She hits the bars—the singles' bars. She drinks, and she screws. All weekend."

Neither Friedman nor I responded; we didn't look at each other. I was aware, though, that Friedman was writing something in his notebook.

"When I found out there was a man living with Marie, and obviously guarding John, I knew I'd have to take him from Quest's house, on Friday or Saturday. So I waited in front of Marie's place, on Friday. I stayed down the block until I saw Guest come to pick up John. I followed them for several hours, until finally they went to Guest's house. I parked again, around the corner. I waited until about one o'clock, until I was sure Guest would be asleep."

"You didn't know that Guest had hired someone to guard John on weekends, when he was staying with Guest?" Friedman asked.

Kramer shook his head. "No."

"You might've expected it, though. Especially if Guest suspected that you were after John."

"Why would he suspect?"

"Why wouldn't he?" Friedman countered. "You'd been through a bitter divorce. You were furious, and he knew it. Not only that, but you already knew John was guarded at your wife's home. That alone would've warned you to expect a guard at Guest's house."

Kramer rubbed an unsteady hand across his forehead, once more shaking his head. His shoulders were sagging; he was slumping in his chair. Catching Friedman's eye, I shook my head. This wasn't the time to press Kramer on details. As long as he was talking, we should let him talk, uninterrupted. Friedman nodded mute agreement as Kramer said wearily:

"You're right, it was a bitter divorce. And, yes, I was furious. It—" He sighed, a ragged exhalation that caught painfully in his throat. "It was brutal. When Guest finished with me, I didn't have a thing. I mean, *nothing*. Overnight, my business dried up. One week I had more clients than I could handle. The next week I had nothing. Zip. Guest had seen to that. No one returned my calls. Clients reneged on contracts, and dared me to sue them. There was only one thing I could do, and that was leave town. Which is what I did. I went back to New York, and started to pick up the pieces. That was the deal Guest offered me, you see. As long as I stayed away from San Francisco, away from his daughter, and John, he wouldn't interfere. He'd even help me, in New York. Which he did, I'll give him that. He helped me start again, and in a year I was back in business. Then I got remarried. Her name is—was—Diane Fischer. It's been two years since we were married. We—" Suddenly he shook his head, and waved a wan, protesting hand, signifying that he'd momentarily run out of words.

"And that's when you started to think about getting your son back," I prompted. "When you got remarried."

He looked at me. "Are you divorced?"

I nodded. "Yes."

"Then you know."

"Yes."

He nodded in return, then dropped his eyes. He'd come to a pause—an agonizing pause. I decided it was time to try and fill in the details, the background: "You married your first wife—Marie—in New York," I said, remembering Alexander Guest's testimony. "You lived there when John was born. You were apparently doing quite well, in your business. Why'd you decide to come to San Francisco?"

"We came to San Francisco," Kramer answered, "because Guest wouldn't have it any other way. He promised me the moon, if I agreed to come here. And he delivered, too. That's the way he operates, you see. As long as you go along with him, the sky's the limit. He'll promise you anything—and

make good on the promise, too. Then, when it's too late, you realize that you've been bought and paid for. He owns you. And you can't forget it. Not for a minute."

"When you were first married," I asked, "did you and Guest get along?"

"Until John was born, he had no interest in me—or in Marie, either. He ignored us. Totally. But then John came along. And he wanted John. From the first, he considered John his property, his possession."

"From what you're saying," Friedman observed, "it's pretty obvious that Guest would've done anything—anything at all—to keep you from getting John." He let a beat pass, then said, "So it should'nt've surprised you that he hired bodyguards for John—bodyguards who would be guarding him around the clock, wherever he was."

"Except that I didn't think he knew my plans," Kramer contended. He shook his head. "I still don't understand how he knew my plans."

"Let's get back to last night," I said. "You waited until one o'clock. Then what'd you do?"

"I got out of the car," he said, "and I walked to Guest's house, around the corner. I went down the driveway to the garage, and from there I went into the house through the rear hallway. I got John up, and got him dressed. I'd brought some of his clothes with me."

"Did you know that John's room is wired for sound?" I asked.

He nodded. "Yes."

"Were you armed?" Friedman asked.

"No. I've already said I wasn't armed. I don't own a gun."

"All right—" Friedman waved a placating hand. "Go ahead."

"I got John dressed, and we left by the door that leads out to the driveway. And we—"

"Excuse me," I said, "but how long were you in the house, would you say?"

"It's hard to know. I've never been much good at judging time. I'd say two or three minutes, at least. It seemed like forever, though."

"Did you jimmy a door, to get in?" Friedman asked. "Did you force an entry?"

"No. There was a key, hidden. I knew about it. That's what I used."

"Did you hear anything inside the house?" I asked. "Did you hear anybody moving?"

"I heard the sound of someone snoring," he said. "I realized that it must've been coming from the room next to John's."

"Who did you think was there, in the next room?"

"I thought it might be one of the servants. Guest's driver, maybe."

"Did you know Guest's driver by sight?"

He nodded. "Yes."

"Then you must've known that the driver and his wife live over the garage," I said.

"I—I did know. But—" He shook his head. "But I probably wasn't thinking clearly. I was—" He licked his lips. "I was nervous. Naturally. I'm not used to housebreaking, after all."

"What'd you do, when you heard the snoring?" Friedman asked.

He shrugged. "Nothing, except try to be as quiet as I could."

"Did you think it might be Guest, in the next room?"

Frowning uncertainly, he finally shook his head. "I—I can't remember. I don't think so, though. I guess—" He frowned. "I guess I always associate Guest with his own bedroom, the master bedroom. I wouldn't ever think he'd sleep in the back of the house. Never."

"Did you know that Guest had a gun—that he's a good shot, apparently?"

He nodded. "I knew he was in the Marines." Then,

bitterly, he added, "I've heard his war stories, and seen his snapshots. He loved it, you know—killing Japs. That's what he calls them. Japs."

"So you got out of the house without being seen," Friedman prodded. "What happened then?"

"We were walking down the driveway toward the sidewalk, John and I, when we heard shots. I've already told you that."

"Describe the shots," I said. I remembered what Guest had said: one shot, followed a few seconds later by three shots in quick succession.

He frowned. "I don't understand what you—?"

"How many shots? How close together?"

"There were three shots," he said. "One shot, and two more. In the space of just a few seconds."

"Three shots? Are you sure?"

"Absolutely."

I exchanged a look with Friedman. Guest had been very specific: Four shots were fired. Had Friedman caught the discrepancy? Should I mention it?

I decided that, for now, silence was safer. There would be plenty of time later for us to confront the suspect with conflicting testimony.

"What'd you do then?" Friedman asked. "After you heard the shots?"

"I kept on going—fast. We got in the car, and drove to Oakland, to the airport."

"Why Oakland? Why not San Francisco International? Oakland is farther away than San Francisco. Ten miles farther, anyhow."

"When I heard the shots," he answered, "I realized that there could be trouble."

"What kind of trouble?" I asked.

He shook his head. "I—I didn't stop to analyze it. I remember thinking, though, that someone might be coming after us. You—the police. So I thought Oakland might be safer."

To myself, I nodded, secretly feeling smug. He'd done exactly what I'd told Guest he might do. After Quade had appeared, and they'd exchanged shots, Kramer realized that San Francisco International would be covered.

"You were going to New York," Friedman said.

He shook his head. "Not directly. I was going down to Los Angeles. Then I was going to take an early flight to New York."

"Why'd you want to go to Los Angeles?" Friedman asked.

"For the same reason I went to Oakland. To keep from getting caught."

"Did you have reservations?" I asked.

"No. I didn't need them, to Los Angeles. That's a shuttle. When I got to L.A., I intended to make reservations to New York."

"You were running, then," Friedman said. "You were running hard."

Kramer made no response.

Glancing at his notes, Friedman asked, "Where did you stay in San Francisco? What hotel?"

"The Clift."

"Did you register under your own name?"

"Yes."

"How about car rental?"

"Hertz. Under my own name."

"Did you turn in the car at the Oakland airport?"

"Yes."

Friedman nodded, then looked at me, signifying that he'd heard enough for now. I nodded in return. As Friedman folded his notebook and slipped it into his pocket, he said, "The way it seems to me, Mr. Kramer, you came to San Francisco intending to take your son and leave town with as little fuss as possible. But you made a mistake. A very common mistake, I'm afraid."

Kramer didn't reply. He sat silently, lifting his head as

Friedman rose to his feet, his eyes on Friedman's face. Behind the fashionable glasses, Kramer's eyes were hollow, smudged by fatigue, haunted by sudden hopelessness, and fear.

"You bought a gun," Friedman said softly. "That was your mistake. You bought a gun. And you used it."

FIVE

FRIEDMAN AND I SPENT THE NEXT HOUR EATING PRE-PACKAGED lunch from a tray in the Hall of Justice basement cafeteria while we discussed the Quade homicide. We decided that, as usual, Friedman would work "inside," coordinating information from the crime lab, and the coroner's office and, later, from the FBI, in Washington. I would do the leg work. We agreed that I should interrogate Marie Kramer and Lester Bennett, the private investigator hired by Gordon Kramer to steal the boy. If I could manage it, I'd try to interrogate John Kramer, too. At age six, his testimony might not be admissible in court. But he could have the answers to some questions that might mean life or death for his father.

After we'd eaten I went home, took off my shoes, lay down on the living room couch, and tried to sleep. Ann and her two sons were out, and I had the flat to myself. But I'd been asleep for only twenty minutes when Billy, Ann's younger son, came home –chortling. He'd been surf fishing off Ocean Beach, and had caught a twelve-pound striper. First, he apologized for awakening me. Then he asked me to clean the striper, since he was late for a karate lesson.

As I was cleaning the fish, I realized that I was wondering how I'd come to be in that particular kitchen, in

that particular flat, cleaning that particular striper. More than a year ago, after a spaced-out cultist had fractured my skull with a ceremonial Mayan spear, I'd moved into Ann's place to recuperate after my release from the "police wing" of the county hospital. I'd returned to duty after only two weeks of recuperation, as good as new. But somehow the time never came for me to pack my bags and return to my own apartment.

Before I'd gotten injured, Ann and I had been lovers for months—lovers, and friends. Often, pillow talking, we spoke of the pleasures and the problems of living together, and wondered whether it would work for us. We could never quite decide, never quite summon the courage to make the commitment, take the chance. We'd talked about marriage, too—but always tentatively. Both of us had been badly scarred by divorce. Without ever having spoken about it in so many words, we'd come to realize that neither of us could quite find the strength to propose marriage. We'd tried to find the strength. Separately, both of us had tried. Once I'd actually started to propose. But Ann had stopped me. Then she'd started to cry—hard. It was the only time I'd seen her cry. As I'd held her in my arms, comforting her, I realized that we simply weren't ready for marriage. Later—years later—marriage might work for us. But not now.

Besides, marriage would mean financial problems. Ann had once said, ruefully, that she was an alimony junkie—like millions of other women. Victor Haywood, the society psychiatrist, paid her both alimony and child support. Adding her ex-husband's payments to her teacher's salary, Ann had been able to raise her two boys and still put aside enough money to pay half their college expenses, as stipulated in her divorce decree. But if she remarried, she lost the alimony. It was income I couldn't replace. I had children, too—a son and a daughter, both teenagers, living with their mother in Michigan. Claudia, my daughter, was beginning college, and I was paying the bills. Darrell, my son, would be starting college in two more years.

So, thanks to a blind-side blow from a Mayan spear,

Ann and I had backed into a commitment that we probably wouldn't otherwise have made. For more than a year, Ann and Billy and Dan and I had been living together. We'd had problems, most of them caused by Victor Haywood. But there'd been pleasures, too. Billy, age fourteen, was still young enough to think policemen were romantic figures. And Dan, three years older, was mature enough to realize that his mother was fulfilled when she was in love.

By four o'clock, I'd finished cleaning the striper. I put it in the refrigerator, cleaned up the fish scales and got dressed. An hour later, I was ringing Marie Kramer's doorbell.

She lived on Telegraph Hill, in a townhouse worth more than a million dollars. The house was a soaring marvel of cast concrete, plate glass, redwood beams, and natural rock. It was built in three tiers that clung to the side of the hill, each tier with a balcony cantilevered out over the hill's steep, rocky slope. The house was built on the east side of Telegraph Hill, where homeowners were rewarded with world-famous views of the city skyline, San Francisco Bay, the city's two bridges, and the green hills of Berkeley and Marin County. To the north, midway out in the bay, Alcatraz provided a note of grim, ugly reality, accenting the picture-postcard beauty that surrounded it.

But, as I rang Marie Kramer's doorbell, I was thinking that she'd chosen a house for adults, not for children. It wasn't a house designed for family life. It was a house for party-giving, for indulging the visual senses—a house that others were meant to envy. On the east slope of Telegraph Hill there were few places for children to play.

The black lacquered door was opened by a man who looked to be in his middle thirties. He was dressed in tight-fitting designer jeans and a tight-fitting T-shirt. The jeans displayed the considerable bulge of his genitals; the T-shirt displayed the well-developed bulges of a weight lifter's torso. The face went with the body: self-indulgent and narcissistic, but handsomely proportioned. It was a face that belonged in the uncertain shadows of a singles' bar, where its deficiencies

would be softened. The eyes were small and unfriendly, animated only by a dull, sullen suspicion as he silently stared at me.

"I'm Lieutenant Frank Hastings," I said, showing him my plastic identification badge. "Mrs. Kramer is expecting me."

"Oh. Yeah." Grudgingly, he stepped back, gesturing for me to precede him up a short flight of carpeted stairs that led to the second of the house's three levels. From the small entryway I could see into a large living room where a woman sat. The room was a white-and-glass room: white walls, white rug, white sofa and chairs combined with glass tables, cut glass decorations, and plate glass windows that framed the view. Huge, colorful daub-and-drip modern paintings were displayed on two walls; bookshelves covered the third wall. The fourth wall was almost entirely glass.

Marie Kramer was sitting in one of the white leather armchairs. As I came toward her, she rose to her feet. Her resemblance to her father was remarkable: Her body was tall and slim, her face was lean, with a wide forehead, a thin, patrician nose, a decisively sculpted mouth and jawline, the face of a willful, arrogant aristocrat. But it was flawed, somehow.

She wore low-cut sheepskin boots, tapered trousers, and an expensive handwoven sweater. Her thick, dark hair was carelessly combed, falling in a ponytail well below her shoulders. Her makeup, too, was careless: lipstick that was smearing, eyeshadow that was smudging. Her body movements and her hand gestures were broad and exaggerated, but slightly out of sync, as if she were in the process of memorizing a character she hoped to play on the stage, but hadn't yet learned to coordinate her mannerisms with her lines. Her voice was slightly exaggerated, too: a little too broadly accented, like a mediocre imitation of a finishing school patois. The mannerisms and the voice conveyed a kind of faded forcefulness, and odd combination of aggression and bemusement.

"Where's John?" she demanded. "Did you bring him? Is he all right? Are you Lieutenant Hastings?"

"Yes, I'm Lieutenant Hastings. And John's fine. Your father picked him up this morning. As far as I know, he's sleeping."

"Picked him up? Where?"

"At the Youth Guidance Center," I answered reluctantly.

"The Youth *Guidance* Center?" Her voice rose indignantly. Briefly, her eyes blazed. "That's for deliquents. *Hoodlums.*"

"That's true. But when a child comes into police custody, he's got to go to the Youth Guidance Center until his parents can come for him. Don't worry. He was well taken care of. He had a private room, and a counselor slept with him until this morning, when your father sent someone for him."

"A private room." She snorted contemptuously and turned abruptly back to her chair, at the same time gesturing for me to sit in a facing chair. There was an outsize coffee mug on the glass-topped table beside her chair. She reached for the mug and drank from it: two long, hard gulps. From the way she did it, from the way she looked away from me while she drank, I knew that the mug contained liquor. During the last two years of my marriage, and for three years afterwards, I'd fought a long, losing battle with the bottle. I knew exactly what she was doing—and exactly why.

She set the mug on the glass table with an awkward clatter, then sat silently for a moment, frowning as she stared out at the view. Between Alcatraz and the near shore, I saw the long, low, sinister shape of an atomic submarine slipping ominously out toward the Golden Gate.

"So he botched it." She spoke softly, bitterly.

"I beg your pardon?"

"He botched it," she repeated, still staring with dark, brooding eyes in the direction of her expensive view. She sat forward in the chair, legs crossed, elbow propped on one knee, chin propped on the palm of her hand. The hand was gracefully

shaped, with long, expressive fingers. But a network of blue veins bulged across the back of the hand. And the fingernails were bitten to the quick.

"He tried to steal John, and he got caught. And—" Incredulously, she shook her head. "And he killed a man, for God's sake."

"Does that surprise you?"

"Yes . . ." She said it ironically, mock-sagaciously. "Yes, Lieutenant, it surprises me. Gordon has his faults. He's made mistakes, God knows. But I never thought—" She broke off, shaking her head. I saw her eyes leave the view and steal toward the coffee mug.

"You never thought he'd kill anyone. Is that it?"

She nodded: a slow, loose inclination of her handsomely shaped head. As the minutes passed, it was increasingly obvious that she was drunk. Surreptitiously, stylishly drunk.

"Yes," she said. "That's it."

"He probably didn't do it intentionally. We think he was frightened. Your father hired a guard. Charlie Quade was his name. We think he went after your husband. Maybe Quade even shot first. So it might not be as bad as it sounds."

"My *ex*-husband, you mean. He's not my husband. Not any more."

"Yes. Sorry."

Still with her chin propped in the palm of her hand, she turned in her chair to face me. I watched her eyes narrow as she stared at me, thoughtfully frowning. Finally she said, "Do you think he did it? Committed murder?"

"I think he probably fired because he thought he was in danger. As I said." I hesitated, then decided to add, "He should be able to plead self-defense."

"Did he have John with him when he killed this man? Was John there? Right there?"

"We think he was, Mrs. Kramer. That's not what your husband says, though. He says they'd already left the house. He says they were outside on the driveway when the shooting started." I let her think about it for a moment, then said,

"John should be able to tell us something. That's one reason I'm here. I'd like to talk to John. I'd like your permission to talk to him."

Instead of responding to the request, she said, "If John was there, inside the house, he must've been terrified." She spoke softly, musingly, with no apparent distress or emotion. It was as if she were talking about someone else's child, not hers. Why, I wondered, had she been so angry a few minutes before, learning that John had been taken to the Youth Guidance Center? Was it because she resented his being forced to spend the night with delinquents?

Or was it because her brief burst of indignation had drained her of emotion, left her bereft of further feeling?

She was sitting motionless now, staring vaguely off across the large, elegantly furnished room, her eyes unfocused. Her momentary preoccupation gave me a chance to look at her more closely. She was probably about thirty-five. But already alcohol had blotched her skin and prematurely lined her face. The closely cut slacks revealed loose, slack flesh across her stomach and over her hips. Beneath the expensive sweater, her breasts had begun to sag into premature middle age. Ten years ago she must have been a long-legged, graceful beauty. Ten years from now, her looks would be long gone.

Finally she said, "I'm trying to imagine what happened—what could've happened. But—" She shook her head. "But I can't get it straight in my mind."

In detail, I described where Quade's body was found, and what the physical evidence seemed to indicate. Then I told her exactly what her father said he had seen and heard. Next I described Guest's movements in the minutes before and after the murder. Finally, I paraphrased Kramer's testimony. As I talked, she kept her eyes fixed on my face. But, once again, her expression revealed nothing: no anxiety, no horror, no calculation. Nothing. She simply listened.

When I finished she sat silently for a moment, her eyes once more slipping vaguely away from mine. Then she began speaking in a dull, lifeless voice. It was a voice without hope,

as empty as her eyes. The earlier assertiveness, the finishing school willfulness seemed suddenly to desert her, leaving her confused, defenseless.

"I never thought anything like this could happen—nothing like murder. It—it all seems like a cheap movie, one of those movies without a very convincing plot. I mean—" Her gaze wandered back to meet mine briefly, then wandered off again. "I mean, it doesn't make much sense, does it?"

I decided not to answer. She was obviously on the point of rambling off into a typical alcoholic's maudlin meandering. And experience had taught me that, if I listened well enough and long enough, and didn't interrupt, I might eventually learn more than I could if I questioned her directly.

Now her face revealed some small trace of expression as her lips twisted into a kind of wan, exhausted smile. "I always knew, I suppose, that it would end badly. My life, I mean. Or, at least, I always suspected it—during those times, that is, when I allowed myself to speculate on the future. Which isn't often, as you might imagine. I mean, I learned long ago how dangerous it is, to think about what's happening to you—and especially, what *could* happen to you." She broke off, suddenly looking at me directly. "You must know what I mean. You have a—a bruised look, like you've seen too much of what's going on inside your head—or your life, or whatever." She shook her head, then looked away again. "People think they can control their own destinies. They think that if they're good enough, or lucky enough, or smart enough, they can change what's going to happen to them. But they're wrong, of course. They can't. We're all of us pre-programmed. So if we stop to think for a minute, we can predict what'll happen. Except that nobody stops. Nobody thinks. It's too painful to think. So we just go on hoping that, the next time, it'll work out. Except that it never does. I knew when I married Gordon that it would never work out. If I'd taken one minute—sixty seconds—to think about it, I could've plotted the whole marriage, from beginning to end. But I didn't, so I couldn't. I thought that a baby would make a difference." Her lips

twisted in another wry, wan smile. "I fell into that old trap. Gordon wanted the child, you see. He's Jewish, so he—" Suddenly she hiccuped. Then, as if the hiccup triggered a connected reaction, she reached for the mug and gulped down two noisy swallows. She put the mug down and sat looking at it for a moment. Then she said, "There's booze in that cup." She raised her eyes to mine, saying, "You know that, don't you? I can see it in those loser's eyes of yours. You know."

As we looked at each other, a message was exchanged. It was a mute confession, a silent recognition that, yes, we shared a secret, she and I. We would never talk about it, never define it. But we knew that the secret we shared—and the secret behind the secret—would control our lives forever. Suddenly I realized that, incredibly, my wayward thoughts had taken me back to the kitchen of my parents' house. I'd just come home from high school, from freshman football practice. I'd found my mother sitting at the kitchen table, crying. She'd just returned home from work, just found my father's note, lying on the table. He was leaving us, he said. He was sorry.

"Did you know that your husband intended to try and take John from you?" I asked.

She nodded slowly, then vaguely shrugged. "I knew what my father told me." Her lips twisted again, sadly mimicking a smile. "That's the trouble. That's always been the trouble, I suppose. All of my information comes from my father." She sat silently for a moment, then said, "He did my divorce. My father, I mean. And that was the trouble, you see. It was like the Treaty of Versailles."

I frowned. "The Treaty of Versailles?"

"Gordon had nothing left, after my father got through with him. No money, no business left—and no visitation rights, either. Not really. So he had to leave town. My father saw to that. Literally, my father drove him out of town. So whenever Gordon got his life put back together, he'd naturally want to get his pound of flesh back. Just like the Germans did, after the First World War. If it hadn't been for the treaty, you see, then we'd never've had Hitler. And—" She hiccuped

again, smiled sadly again, shrugged again. "I'm a history buff, you see. Or, at least, I used to be a—" She broke off, obviously struck by a sudden thought. I saw her eyes sharpen. Her mouth came spontaneously open as momentary shock penetrated her alcoholic bemusement.

"Maybe Gordon thought it was—"

I waited for her to finish it. Speaking in a hushed voice, her eyes searching mine, she said: "Maybe he thought it was my father, when he shot."

"Yes," I answered, "I thought about that. It would make sense out of what happened."

"Except that Gordon's not a killer. For one thing, he's too smart. He's tough enough to kill someone, maybe. But he's too smart to do it. He was a street kid, you know, when he grew up—a Jewish street kid. So he—"

I heard the sound of a buzzer. Someone was at the front door. I looked at Marie Kramer inquiringly, but she waved a slack hand. "Bruce will get it."

"Is he the bodyguard your father hired?"

She nodded. "That's right. Bruce Durkin." She smiled, mockingly lascivious. "He's beautiful, isn't he?"

Remembering Kramer's statement that Marie Kramer hit the singles' bars on the weekends, I nodded knowingly.

With the leering, boozy smile still in place, she said, "He lives downstairs. There's a small apartment down there, completely self-contained. In case you were wondering."

I was writing "Bruce Durkin" in my notebook when a boy came up the stairs, followed by a well dressed, middle-aged man. The boy, of course, was John Kramer. I watched him come up to the head of the stairs and stop. Standing motionless, he looked first at me, his dark eyes solemn. Then he turned toward his mother, who had risen unsteadily to her feet. For a moment the two faced each other. Then, awkwardly, the woman moved toward the boy. She steadied herself with a hand on the back of her chair, as if she were unwilling to leave the security it offered. The boy took one hesitant step

forward, then another. Now he stopped, watching her with his dark eyes. His expression revealed nothing.

As Marie Kramer closed the few feet between them and stooped to put her arms around her son, the image of a stage play returned: the hesitant actress, unsure of herself, acting out lines from a half-learned script. The boy didn't return her embrace. He waited calmly until she'd dropped her arms and stepped back. Then he announced, "We rode in a police car, all the way across the bridge, from the airport. I sat in front. Right by the radio and the shotgun."

"Do you want something to eat?" Marie Kramer asked.

"It's Saturday, isn't it?"

"Yes," she answered.

"Did I miss the cartoons?"

"I—" She blinked. "I'm not sure, John. Do you want to—?" She moved her head toward a flight of stairs that led up to the house's third level. The meaning: he could go to his room and watch TV.

"I want some chocolate milk and cookies while I'm watching."

"Yes. All right. Here—" She put a hand on his shoulder, turning him away from us. "Here, I'll get it for you."

But he shook off her hand, turning to stare at me with his large, dark eyes. Irrationally, his eyes reminded me of the CARE posters that asked for food contributions to underprivileged children in foreign lands.

"This is Lieutenant Hastings, John," the woman said, still standing awkwardly beside her son, still weaving unsteadily on her feet. Still unable to touch him with a mother's caress. "He's a policeman, too. Like the—" She broke off, frowning. She'd forgotten what she'd meant to say.

I smiled down at the boy, saying, "One of the reasons I've come, John, is that I'd like to talk to you—if your mother's willing."

Before either the woman or the boy could speak, the well dressed man stepped forward quickly. He produced an

alligator card case, handing over a business card with a smoothly practiced gesture.

"I'm Michael Carmody, Lieutenant. I'm an associate of Alexander Guest's." He waited for me to glance at the card, then turned to Marie Kramer. "If you and John are going to be busy for a few minutes, Mrs. Kramer, I'd like to speak to the lieutenant."

She looked at the lawyer, looked at me, then looked down at her son, who was still staring impassively at me. Finally she nodded. She did it tentatively, uncertainly—as if she were accustomed to taking orders that she didn't understand.

"I don't want any milk or cookies now," the boy said, planting his feet firmly on the white wool carpet. He didn't intend to move. "I want to talk to him." He raised his arm full length, pointing at me with an imperious forefinger.

"John. Please. Michael—Mr. Carmody—wants to talk to the lieutenant." Tentatively, she put her hand on his shoulder. "Let's go. Let's—"

"*No.*" Vehemently, he shook his head. "He said he wanted to talk to me. He just said it."

"John—" I stooped, lowered my voice. "You go with your mother. Later, we'll talk. I promise. Before I leave, we'll talk."

"Will you show me your gun?"

I looked at the woman, searching her face for a reaction to the boy's request. When she made no visible protest, I nodded. "Yes."

"And your handcuffs, too?"

"Yes."

Dark eyes slightly narrowed now, face puckered with suspicion, he stood his ground for a moment, making up his mind. Then he nodded: a decisive, businesslike bobbing of his small head. "Good." He turned abruptly and led the way to the stairs. Marie Kramer smiled at me, grateful for my help. It was our first moment of full, person-to-person contact. Then she turned and followed the boy upstairs to the third floor.

Carmody walked quickly to one of the huge windows, the furthermost point in the living room from both staircases. Lowering his voice, he said, "You realize, of course, that you can't interrogate John—not without parental permission."

"Or a court order."

"Yes. Well, I'll check with Mr. Guest. But I doubt very much if he'll approve of your interrogating John. Not now. Not so soon after—last night."

"Mr. Guest is John's grandfather. Not his father. Legally, there's a big difference."

"Where the boy is concerned—" The lawyer glanced over his shoulder toward the upstairs staircase. "Where John is concerned, Mr. Guest and Mrs. Kramer see eye to eye. Always."

I let a long, heavy moment of silence pass while I stared at him—and while I made up my mind how to handle his objections. Finally I decided to say, "I promised to talk to him, promised to show him my gun. I'll do that—now. Right now. But I won't interrogate him about what happened last night. Not without checking with the D.A. And, certainly, Mrs. Kramer will be present during the interrogation."

"I'd like to witness the conversation you're going to have with him now." He made it sound like a command, not a request.

I shrugged. "Suit yourself."

With the confidence of someone who was familiar with his surroundings, Carmody led the way up to the third floor and down a short hallway to John's room, where the TV was blaring. While the mother and the lawyer looked on, I sat beside John on the boy's bed and unholstered my revolver while Carmody turned the TV down.

"The first thing you always do," I said, "is unload the weapon." I swung out the cylinder and showed him how to eject the cartridges. I put the cartridges in my jacket pocket, swung the cylinder back into place and held the revolver in the palm of my hand. "Now it's safe. You can *see* it's safe. And that's why policemen carry revolvers, instead of automatics." I

looked at him. "Do you know the difference between a revolver and an automatic?"

Promptly, he nodded. "Sure. An automatic has the bullets in the handle. And you don't have to cock it. You just keep pulling the trigger."

Surprised, I nodded. "That's right. Where'd you learn about guns, John?"

As if the question disturbed him, he looked quickly away, refusing to answer. I looked at him thoughtfully for a moment as I gripped the pistol for firing, pulling back the hammer and aiming at a cartoon figure on the silent TV screen. When I pulled the trigger and the hammer fell, the boy's whole body responded, reacting to the loud metallic *click*.

"Let me try."

I handed over the gun, cautioning: "Don't point it at anyone. Don't ever do that. You always treat a gun as if it's loaded."

Nodding, he used both thumbs to draw back the hammer, used both hands to aim the gun at another cartoon figure. Concentrating fiercely on steadying the gun, his finger tightened on the trigger as his tongue came through his lips, moving to one side. It was the classic picture of total childhood concentration. As the hammer fell, his whole body reacted again, electrically.

"Wow!" His eyes glowed. "I could've blown it up. The whole TV. If it'd been loaded, I could've killed it. Can I try again?"

"One more time." I smiled, cautioning him again not to point the gun at anyone. Rapturously, he dry-fired the weapon again, then carefully gave it back to me.

"You handle it like a pro," I said. "Is this the first time you've ever held a revolver?" As I asked the question, I reloaded the gun and slipped it into its holster.

Once more he looked quickly away. "Can I see the handcuffs now?"

I'd already decided how I'd answer the inevitable

question, turning his intense interest to my advantage. "I'll tell you what, John—why don't we do that when I come back again? Maybe tomorrow, or the next day. Okay?" I glanced at my watch. "I've got to get back to police headquarters now." It was a lie, calculated for its effect.

"Police headquarters," he breathed, taking the bait. "No fooling?"

I got to my feet, smiling down at him. "No fooling. I'll see you soon. We'll have longer to talk, the next time. Okay?"

He was plainly disappointed—and plainly not accustomed to having his expectations unsatisfied. But, doubtless having made his own calculations, his answering nod was grudgingly polite. "Yeah—okay. Tomorrow?"

"I hope so. Soon, anyhow." Pretending that I had to leave quickly, I thanked Marie Kramer, nodded to Michael Carmody and left the room. I went down the first flight of stairs to the living room level, down the second flight of stairs to the front door, and let myself out. Bruce Durkin, the bodyguard, was standing on a small landing halfway down the steep flight of flagstone steps that led to the street, and my car. Both the steps and the landing were protected by a sturdy iron hand railing. Looking down, I could see why. The rocky hillside fell sharply away from the steps.

"You're Bruce Durkin," I said.

He'd been looking off across the bright blue waters of San Francisco Bay, picturesquely dotted with hundreds of sails, most of them clustered south of the vicious riptides that sometimes ran between the Golden Gate and Susuin Bay to the northeast. When I spoke to him he turned to face me. With his muscular arms crossed over his muscular chest, and his muscular buttocks pressed on display against the guardrail, Durkin looked like he was posing for a second-rate body building magazine. "Yes," he answered, "that's right."

"How long have you been here, working for Mrs. Kramer?"

"About four months."

Which confirmed what Guest had told me about when he had learned Gordon Kramer intended to take his son.

"You're a bodyguard."

"Right."

I nodded, letting a long, deliberate moment of silence pass as I looked him over. Unlike Alexander Guest and Marie Kramer, Bruce Durkin was a familiar type to me: not very smart, not very cooperative—and probably not very law-abiding. The sullen, half hostile answers, the closed face, the suspicious eyes—these were part of the policeman's daily experience, his stock in trade. People like Durkin and people like me were natural antagonists. Yet, perversely, we depended on each other, Durkin and I. Without people like him, people like me wouldn't be necessary, wouldn't be needed.

"You know what happened last night," I said. "A man—an ex-policeman—was killed, guarding John."

"Yeah—I know." He puffed out his lips and shook his head, as if I'd recounted some obscenity that he found contemptuous.

"You were in the same business," I said, "you and Charlie Quade. Did that ever occur to you? Both of you were hired to guard John."

"Was that his name? Charlie Quade?"

"Yes."

"Yeah. Well—" His shoulders lifted in a muscle-rippling shrug. "From what I hear, this Charlie Quade was maybe asking for it."

"How do you mean, asking for it?"

"I mean, he had a gun. You have a gun, people start shooting at you."

"You don't have a gun, then."

Once more, he puffed his lips, this time flatulently, contemptuous of people stupid enough to carry guns. "Not me."

"As I understand Kramer's story," I said, "he followed John all day yesterday. Which meant that, at one point, he was

here—" I gestured to the street, where Kramer had probably parked.

"What kind of a car was he driving?" Durkin asked.

I had to admit that I didn't know; I hadn't asked.

"Do you know Kramer by sight?" I asked.

He hesitated a moment, then shook his head. "No."

"You've never seen him, then."

"No."

"What did you do yesterday? Give me a rundown on your day."

"That's easy. My days don't change much, you know."

I waited while he smirked humorlessly at his own remark. "I took John to his school at eight o'clock in the morning," he said. "He has to be there at 8:30. Then I did some errands. I drove out to the beach for an hour or so, and did some running. Then I came back here and washed the car and had some lunch. At 1:30, I picked John up at school. We got back here about two, I guess. He watched TV until about four, I guess it was, when Mr. Guest came for him."

"Was Mr. Guest alone when he arrived?"

"No. He has a driver."

"What kind of a car does he have?"

"It's a Cadillac."

"A limousine?"

"No. Just a Cadillac. Dark blue."

"What time did John and Mr. Guest leave here?"

"Maybe fifteen minutes after Mr. Guest got here. Maybe twenty minutes. No more."

"What'd you do then, after they left?"

"I took off. I locked up the house, and set the alarms. And then I took off. See, after John leaves with his grandfather, until he comes back Sunday afternoons, usually, I'm off duty. So I split. As soon as I can, I'm gone. Long gone."

Listening to the surly inflections of his voice, watching him, it seemed obvious that Bruce Durkin wasn't happy in his work.

"You don't like bodyguarding," I said.

He shrugged, staring off toward the view with his dull, resentful eyes. "I guess bodyguarding's all right. But bodyguarding a kid. *That* kid—" Angrily, he shook his head.

"You don't like John."

"That's putting it mildly," he answered heavily. He glowered at me, then added, "You could even say I hate that kid. He's about the most miserable kid I've ever seen. *Ever.*"

"Was Mrs. Kramer on the premises when Mr. Guest came for John?"

He smirked. "No, she left about noon. Maybe a little before."

I debated exploring the smirk, but finally decided against it. There would be other chances to interrogate Durkin, after I had more information.

"What'd you do last night?" I asked.

"I went out and had dinner and went to a movie. I got home about midnight, maybe a little after. I watched a late movie, and drank a little wine. Then I went to sleep."

"Was Mrs. Kramer here last night when you got home?"

He rippled his muscles again in another sullen shrug. "I don't know. I didn't hear her. But she could've been sleeping—or something."

This time, there was no question what the smirk meant. I decided to change the subject.

"You say you've been guarding John for four months."

"Right."

"In that time, did anyone try to take him?"

"No. No one."

"Do you know Lester Bennett?"

"No."

"Have you ever heard of Lester Bennett?"

"No."

"Have you ever been arrested?"

"Arrested?" Brow elaborately furrowed, he looked at me as if I'd asked the question in a foreign language.

"You don't have to answer. But we've got computers, you know. It'll only take a couple of minutes to find out."

"Well, I was in a couple of—you know—barroom fights. Drunk and disorderly. Things like that."

"Where was that?"

"Down in L.A."

I nodded, and took my car keys from my pocket. "Okay, that about does it. If you think of anything else—" I handed him a card. "Give me a call."

"Right."

"And thanks for the information," I decided to say. "I appreciate it."

"No problem."

SIX

AFTER LEAVING THE HOUSE ON TELEGRAPH HILL, I CALLED communications from a small Italian restaurant in North Beach. The dispatcher put me through to Friedman, who'd just been in the process of getting Marie Kramer's unlisted phone number, to call me.

"The gun's turned up," he said. "Or, at least, it figures to be the gun. It's a .38 Smith and Wesson revolver. Which fits. It's a .38 that killed Quade, according to the lab."

"Where was the gun found?"

"That's the odd part," Friedman said. "They found it at the scene. Or, at least, close to the scene. As I understand the layout, there's a long driveway that goes along the north side of Guest's house, leading to the garage at the rear, where entrance was effected. Right?"

"Right."

"And the murderer—Kramer, we assume—killed Quade at the rear of the house, off the garage, then exited onto the driveway through a side door, also toward the rear of the house. From there, he had to go back the way he came, down the driveway to the front sidewalk. Right?"

"Right."

"Well, he apparently ditched the gun in some shrubbery that's planted in front of the house, close to the sidewalk."

"Right where it'd probably be found. Is that what you mean by 'odd?'"

"That's what I mean."

"He was probably rattled. He wanted to get rid of the gun as soon as he could, before he started walking to his car. It's the normal reaction."

"The normal reaction," Friedman countered, "would be to find a garbage can or a sewer grate a half block or so from the crime scene."

"I don't think they have garbage cans in Sea Cliff. Maybe they don't even have sewers."

He snorted unappreciatively. Friedman seldom enjoyed someone's else's quip.

"What's the lab say about the gun?" I asked.

"Nothing, yet. It'll take them several hours. They just got it. Incidentally, have you seen the afternoon paper?"

"No."

"Well, they're really ballyhooing this one. It figures, of course. Every time Guest farts, it's news. We've had network TV reporters in the lobby downstairs, and they've got Guest on tape, I understand. So this thing could be on the six o'clock network news, for God's sake. And you know what that means."

I knew what it meant: a call from Chief Dwyer. Several calls from Dwyer, who would be worrying about his image.

"What'd you find out from the kid's mother?" Friedman asked.

In detail, in sequence, I summarized the entire interrogation, including my conversations with John Kramer and Bruce Durkin. When I'd finished, Friedman asked, "How old is this kid?"

"Six years old."

"Is he smart?"

"I think so. Spoiled, but smart."

"His testimony could tell us a lot. A hell of a lot, maybe."

"Except that we might not be able to get it without his mother's permission. Or else a court order."

"Maybe yes, maybe no. Let's see what the D.A. says."

"There could also be a problem with admissibility of the kid's evidence in court."

"How so?" Friedman asked.

"It's a question of whether the child is competent—whether he comprehends the true nature of the crime, and knows what's expected of him. I testified two or three years ago in the Sheppard case. Remember? A man murdered his wife. Their children, two of them, were the only witnesses."

"I remember the case. What happened in court?"

"The defense attorney contended that the children weren't competent as witnesses. The judge cleared the courtroom and sent the jury out. Then the judge and the two lawyers questioned the kids. And it turned out that the kids simply couldn't comprehend what was expected from them. They couldn't comprehend the nature of the crime, or the penalties. They couldn't stand up to cross examination, either. They were like reeds in the wind. They changed their stories according to what they thought the judge or the lawyers wanted to hear."

"How old were these kids?" Friedman asked.

"Three and five, I think."

"That's a factor. The age of the children. The younger they are, obviously, the less reliable they are. But this kid is six. Not three. Six."

"I know."

"And the fact remains," Friedman insisted, "that John Kramer was, after all, a witness at the scene of a murder. He was an eyewitness, probably the only eyewitness. And he's six years old. He's in the first grade. He's learning to read, if I'm not mistaken. And if he really was with his father every second, before and after the shooting, and if he corroborates Kramer's story—" Speculatively, his voice trailed off. For a

moment, neither of us spoke. Then Friedman said, "It's a fascinating situation, when you think about it. This kid, this six-year-old kid, has his father's fate in his hands."

"Except that we might not be able to get to John without his mother's permission, not without hassling, anyhow. And that means we've got to get Guest's permission for the interrogation, I can promise you that. Marie Kramer does whatever her daddy tells her. She's too—too befuddled to do anything else."

"And both of them hate Kramer," Friedman mused. "So why should they let the kid be interrogated, especially if they have reason to think his testimony would help Kramer?"

Thinking about the possibilities, I didn't reply. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a woman standing close beside the phone booth, frowning. I turned away from her.

"And even if we should get their permission," Friedman went on, "and we interviewed the kid, the D.A. might not be able to use the testimony in court. Assuming, that is, that he'd *want* to use the testimony, after he heard it." As he spoke, I could plainly hear the titillation in his voice. This was exactly the kind of complicated riddle that most intrigued Friedman.

"Do you have anything else?" I asked finally.

"Yes," he answered, almost absently. "I've got a preliminary lab report from the crime scene. They've accounted for all four shots—Guest's four shots, that is. They found two .45 slugs in the woodwork and walls. They were from Quade's gun. Which, incidentally, was registered to Quade. And they found two .38 slugs, one inside Quade, lodged in his neck, and the other in the wall. That one was expended, after going through Charlie's shoulder. From the angle and the position of the bullets, it seems like Charlie was standing just a few feet from the door of his bedroom, and the murderer was standing in the hallway toward the back of the house, about fifteen feet from Charlie."

The murderer, he'd said. Not *Kramer.*

As if he'd tuned in on my thoughts, Friedman said, "I

get the feeling that there're a few surprises ahead, in this one."

"Why do you say that?"

"Well," he answered, "first, there's the discrepancy between how many shots were fired. And then there's Kramer."

"What about Kramer?"

"He doesn't strike me as a murderer."

"Come on, Pete. Murderers come in all shapes and sizes. You know that."

"Do you think I'm wrong?"

"I think that Kramer thought Quade was going to kill him, and he acted in self-defense. Or, more like it, he thought that Guest was trying to kill him."

Another short silence followed. Finally Friedman said, "That kid. We've got to talk to that kid."

I didn't answer. He knew I'd do my best.

"Well," Friedman said, "what's your next move?"

"My next move," I said, "is to talk to Lester Bennett. Then I'm going home. I plan to be in bed by 8:30."

"I'll pull your plug at Communications."

"Good. I'd appreciate it."

"But I think we should touch base tomorrow, with all this publicity heat. Even though it's Sunday. Why don't you call me in the morning, at home?"

"It's a deal." Wearily, I put the receiver on the hook, and smiled apologetically at the impatient woman as I opened the door of the phone booth. Frowning ferociously, she snatched at the door, pulling it away from my hand.

SEVEN

FRIEDMAN HAD ONCE OBSERVED THAT SAN FRANCISCO WAS THE only city in the country where a private investigator like Lester Bennett could operate. It was a point well taken. For years, Bennett worked as an interior decorator, not very successfully. To make ends meet, he began taking part time assignments from Foley and Brand, who specialized in the seamy side of private investigation: divorces and custody cases. Soon afterward, Bennett closed his decorating studio and opened his own agency, working the same unsavory side of the street. His specialty was child stealing, and he was an instant success. In less than five years, he'd opened branch offices in New York, Los Angeles, and Dallas.

Bennett was in his early forties, slim as a ballet dancer, and just as precious. He had the face of a malicious satyr, accented by a beard trimmed to a satanic point. He lived in a large, elegant apartment on the top floor of the Golden Gateway, one of the city's newest concrete and glass architectural marvels.

As I pressed the button beside Bennett's Spanish-carved door, I heard the sound of music and laughter coming from inside the apartment. A moment later the door opened. A young man dressed in black velvet slacks and a bright

yellow silk shirt stood in the doorway. The shirt was unbuttoned almost to his waist, revealing several gold chains glittering on a hairy, bleached-blond chest.

"Yes?" He looked me quickly up and down, obviously not impressed with what he saw.

As I identified myself, I saw Bennett coming toward the door.

"Hello, Lieutenant. Care for a drink? It's Saturday, you know. Cocktail time."

As the young man in the velvet slacks flounced away, Bennett grasped my forearm, drawing me inside. He was smiling, obviously pleased that I'd come. I thought I knew why. I would be his unwitting floorshow, a source of snide, snickering amusement.

"I want to talk to you," I said. "Privately."

His satyr's smile widened. "Certainly. Just let me get a refill, will you? Are you sure—" Invitingly, he lifted his empty champagne glass.

"No, thanks."

A girl dressed neck to ankle in skintight silver lamé filled his glass, then Bennett took me into a small room furnished as an office.

"Let me guess," he said, sitting behind the desk and gesturing me to a chair with a graceful wave of his arm. "It's Charlie Quade. Right?"

"It's Charlie Quade and Gordon Kramer."

"The murderer and his victim." He sipped his champagne, looking at me over the rim of the glass. He was dressed in designer jeans and a khaki bush jacket that looked as if he'd actually worn it on safari. A silk scarf was knotted at his throat.

"I didn't say that."

"I know you didn't, Frank." Playfully, he smiled. "May I call you Frank?"

Without realizing that I had said it, I answered shortly, "I'd rather you didn't."

He shrugged; a languid lifting of his slim, expressive

shoulders. "Suit yourself. I was trying to be friendly. Does that bother you?"

"A little."

He snickered. Then, deadpan, elaborately resigned to my boorishness, he began to talk, speaking in an exaggerated monotone, mimicking himself on a tape recorded report.

"Gordon Kramer called me about six months ago. He told me what he wanted done. At the time, I didn't connect Marie Kramer with Alexander Guest. I told Kramer I'd get back to him. I contacted my New York office, and told them to check Kramer out."

"Did he check out?"

"Financially, he checked out. And the divorce checked out. That's about as far as the New York office went, which was a pity."

"A pity?"

He sighed, glancing pointedly to the door and the sounds of his party. "Why don't you let me run it down for you? Then we can play interrogation."

"Go ahead." I realized that I'd wanted to say, 'Go ahead, asshole.' I also realized that the longer I talked to Bennett, the sleazier I felt.

"While New York was checking Kramer out," he said, "we started doing some preliminary work here, in San Francisco. Charlie Quade was working for me part time, and—"

"Charlie—?" I caught myself, ill-temperedly gesturing for him to continue.

"Charlie did the ground work, out here. Of course, he found out who the subject was—Guest's grandson. He also discovered that the subject was probably the only person in the world that Guest cared about. So, obviously, I sent back Kramer's retainer. I mean, I'm not about to get downwind of Alexander Guest, now—am I?" His delicate little smile was primly self-satisfied. He sipped more champagne, and went on.

"The next step was obvious. I'll deny I ever did it, of

course. But the only smart thing to do after I kissed off a fat fee was to turn virtue to my advantage, if possible. So I got an appointment with the great man himself—finally—and I told him the story. And I'm happy to report that virtue was rewarded. Guest called me a couple of days later, and told me he was grateful for the warning, and said that he needed a man for a confidential assignment. I decided to send Charlie around to him. Not that Charlie was any genius. But, obviously, when I pulled him off the Kramer case, I felt I owed him something."

"What was the job that Guest wanted done? Bodyguarding?"

"I don't know," Bennett answered. "I didn't want to know, for obvious reasons."

"What obvious reasons?"

He sighed, impatient with my obtuseness. "Guest hinted that the assignment involved Kramer. He said that he wanted to 'insure John's future,' as he put it. And, after all, I've got a reputation to protect. Kramer *was* my original client, wasn't he? So, if the original client's target—Guest—wants to come back on the client, then I don't want to be involved. At least, not officially." He teased me with a smug little smile. "Did you follow all that?"

"You did get involved, though. You gave him Quade."

"That's true. But Quade only worked for me case to case. Basically, he was an independent operator. So, in fact, it worked out beautifully. I didn't want to know what Charlie was doing for Guest. I told Charlie so, specifically. And, of course, that was fine with Charlie. He wanted to keep Guest for himself, naturally. If he could."

"Charlie must've told you something, though."

"All he said," Bennett answered, "was that he got something pretty juicy, that apparently involved considerable travel expense—which, of course, Charlie padded. So, naturally, he was ecstatic." With an air of elegant finality, Bennett drained his champagne glass. "And that," he said, "is pretty much that. The next thing I knew, I heard on the radio this morning that Charlie was dead."

"This job for Guest —did it involve more than guarding the boy?"

"Frank. Baby." He rose to his feet, standing coquettishly behind his expensive desk, one hand resting lightly on his hip. "If I knew any more, I'd tell you. I really would. But I don't know any more. I've told you why I don't know any more. And, if you're as smart as some say you are, you'll realize that I'm telling the truth. The whole truth."

"Yes," I answered, getting to my feet and moving to the door. "Yes, I suppose you are." I thrust my notebook deep into my jacket pocket, took a deep breath, and grudgingly thanked him for his cooperation.

EIGHT

AFTER A GOOD NIGHT'S SLEEP, I CALLED FRIEDMAN AT TEN o'clock Sunday morning.

"I had to restrain myself from calling you last night," he announced. "Late last night. Have you seen the Sunday papers?"

"No. I just got up."

"I'd give long odds," Friedman said, "that Guest told his public relations flacks to pull out all the stops on this one. I know for a fact that, yesterday afternoon, he called in four reporters, and gave them his version of what happened. And, naturally, the reporters took the bait. They've practically got Kramer with a noose around his neck, on the front page. The only thing that hasn't happened—yet—is a story on network news. The D.A., as you can imagine, is totally pissed. So, naturally, the D.A. called Chief Dwyer—who called me last night about eleven o'clock. And Dwyer, also, is pissed. Very, very pissed."

"Why? He loves publicity."

"He's probably pissed because Guest got top billing. But the real problem, obviously, is that all this publicity could hurt the D.A.'s case against Kramer. Which is what the D.A. told Dwyer, no doubt about it."

"Guest's a lawyer," I said. "He should know better. Especially since he obviously wants to see Kramer convicted."

"Guest's a publicity hound, just like most high rollers. It goes with the territory."

"Are the lab reports in on the gun yet?"

"Yes. But I don't have time to tell you about them now. We're due at the D.A.'s office in forty-five minutes. I'll tell you about the reports after the meeting."

"Forty-five *minutes*? I haven't even eaten. Or shaved. I'm still in my pajamas, for God's sake. And it'll take a half hour, at least, to drive to the D.A.'s office. Even on Sunday."

I heard him sigh. "All I can tell you is, the D.A. called Dwyer, and Dwyer called—"

"I know. Dwyer called you. *Christ.*"

"Does that mean I'll see you in forty-five minutes?"

"Do I have a choice?"

James Stringfellow was about forty-five, about six feet tall. He was gaunt and stoop-shouldered, badly balding. He wore pin-striped suits and old-fashioned rimless glasses. His neck was long and skinny, with a prominent Adam's apple. Because his nose was so long and thin and his dark eyes with their generous bags beneath were so mournful, Stringfellow always reminded me of a walking raven. He had no hobbies, no wife, no sense of humor. But he was the first assistant district attorney, supervising almost a hundred lesser assistants. When the D.A. wanted a job done right, he gave the case to Stringfellow.

Even though it was Sunday, and the D.A.'s office was virtually deserted, Stringfellow was dressed as always, in his pin-striped suit, white shirt, and out-of-style narrow tie. He greeted us politely, in his dry, precise voice, then gestured us to comfortable leather armchairs. He asked us politely whether we'd like coffee. When we declined, he pulled a legal pad across the desk, clicked his gold ball-point pen and looked at us expectantly.

Occasionally referring to his notebook, Friedman

talked for almost a half hour. During his summary, I learned that, yes, the revolver found in the shrubbery beside Guest's driveway was the murder weapon. I also learned that the gun was apparently wiped clean of fingerprints. However, partial prints had been found on the cartridges in the cylinder. Whether there were sufficient "points" to certify the prints as evidence was doubtful, but they'd been forwarded to both Sacramento and Washington. Sacramento had just reported that the gun wasn't registered in California, and hadn't been reported stolen in California. They'd just sent the information on the gun to the FBI, requesting a nationwide ownership and theft check. With luck—a lot of luck—we'd know the results of the check by tomorrow afternoon. First-round computer scans of unclassified latent fingerprints found at the murder scene had revealed nothing. The next phase of the fingerprint comparison process, visual comparison, would take days, weeks, maybe months.

When Friedman had finished talking, Stringfellow lifted his head, primly studying his notes through his bifocals. As he read, he thoughtfully pinched an earlobe. After more than a minute, he nodded, as if to indicate that, for him, the pieces of the puzzle had fallen into place. From my previous dealings with Stringfellow, I knew what to expect next: a no-nonsense, rapid-fire string of probing questions. He started with me. Did I have any additions to Friedman's report? Any differences? What was my impression of each of the subjects I'd interrogated? Were they smart? Observant? Truthful? Biased?

As I talked, Stringfellow worked fussily at his notes, allowing one page of his lined yellow pad for each of the subjects I'd interrogated. When I finished my summary, he took another minute or two to study the sheaf of yellow pages. Then he looked up, cleared his throat, adjusted his old-fashioned glasses on his long, pinched nose, tugged down his vest and spoke in his dry, schoolmaster's voice.

"This seems pretty straightforward. We've got Kramer on the scene, by his own admission, corroborated by Alexan-

der Guest. Physical evidence—fingerprints and fibers—will probably confirm his presence. So we've got opportunity and we've got probable motive. The only reliable witness—Guest—is rock solid. If we get any hard evidence linking Kramer to the murder weapon, I'd say we've got a case we can take to the grand jury, no question about it. The unknown quantity, of course, is the boy's testimony. And, actually, that could be critical, assuming that the judge stipulates that he's competent and allows him to testify in open court. But, whether or not the boy makes it to open court, his testimony is obviously going to influence everyone: our side, the defense, the judge. At the very least, his testimony could affect the judge's charge to the jury. So it's critical, obviously, that we know what that testimony is going to be. Do you understand?" He looked at both of us in turn, waited fussily for us to nod, and then continued.

"To sum up, one way or the other, we've got to find out what John Kramer will probably tell the judge. And we've also got to find out how solid his testimony will be, assuming he's put on the stand. So I'd say that your first priority should be to talk to the boy." He looked at me. "What d'you think your chances are of interrogating him without parental objection?"

"I might have a shot at it," I said. "I think he trusts me."

"Is the boy with his mother now?" Stringfellow asked.

"Yes."

"Good—" He nodded. "You want to make absolutely sure she's present during the interrogation. Only her. Don't let Guest get involved, for God's sake. There's no reason for that—no legal reason—whatever. Guest isn't the child's legal guardian. Which is to say that he has no control over the child's life. None whatever."

"That's not the way he acts," I answered ruefully.

"I understand that. I'm certain that it must be difficult, dealing with him. But I'm telling you your legal position."

"Will it take a court order to interrogate the boy?" Friedman asked.

"Not to interrogate him, I shouldn't think, provided his parent is present." Stringfellow frowned, this time kneading his lower lip between thumb and forefinger as he considered the question. "I suppose," he said, "that you could conceivably need a court order to enter the premises, if his parent or guardian objects to interrogation. But in a capital case, for a child who's six years old—" He shook his head. "No, there shouldn't be a problem, interrogating him. Provided, as I've said, that his mother is present during the interrogation."

"Good." Friedman nodded.

"And, obviously, we don't want Kramer talking to the boy—Kramer, or his lawyer, if we can help it. At least, not until we've talked to the boy first. That's essential. If we assume that Kramer has programmed the boy to tell a false story, we don't want that falsity reinforced. Which, conceivably, Kramer's lawyer could accomplish."

"Right." Friedman nodded again.

"Good. Well—" Stringfellow shuffled his papers together and pushed himself back from his big walnut desk. "Is there anything we haven't covered?"

"Have you talked to Kramer?" Friedman asked.

Stringfellow nodded. "I talked to him yesterday evening."

"And?"

"Well—" The lawyer once more began pulling at his earlobe. "I found his story remarkably consistent. However, at the moment, he's the only suspect we've got. That's to say, we've got a corpse at the scene of the crime, and we've got a boy, and we've got Kramer, and we've got Alexander Guest. And if we eliminate the boy, and we eliminate Kramer, then that leaves Alexander Guest. And I must say—" He permitted himself a small, prim smile. "I must say that I, for one, wouldn't like to prosecute Alexander Guest for the murder of his own grandson's bodyguard. Not on the evidence as it stands now, anyhow."

"Are you saying that you want me to interrogate John Kramer before you decide to ask for an indictment?" I asked.

"No, that's not what I'm saying," Stringfellow answered. "As far as I know, tomorrow we're going before a special session of the grand jury, asking for an indictment. However, as soon as possible, I'd like to find out what John Kramer has to say—how solid he is. That's what I'm saying. So keep in touch." He positioned his papers neatly on his desk, smiled perfunctorily, shook hands with both of us, and wished us good day.

NINE

FRIEDMAN AND I GOT COFFEE FROM A MACHINE AND WENT DOWN the corridor to his office. When he unlocked the door we saw a sheet of paper on the floor. Together, standing, we read the unevenly printed message:

CALL CHIEF DWYER AT HOME

Canelli's initials were scrawled in the lower left hand corner, along with the day and time: *Sunday, 10:20 A.M.*

Friedman stepped over the paper and sighed as he sank down in his chair, unlocking his desk drawer. I knew he was looking for a cigar, his first of the day. When he began muttering under his breath, I smiled. There were no cigars in his desk. Since it was Sunday, and he wasn't wearing a vest, he didn't have any cigars with him. And the cigar store in the lobby was closed. Friedman was stuck.

"What'll you bet," Friedman said, pointing to the message, "that you've got one, too."

"I don't plan to go to my office. That way, I'll never know."

"There's no point in both of us taking Dwyer's lip. Is that it?"

I nodded. "That's it."

"He could've called you at home. There could be a message beside the telephone."

"I plan to be in the field."

"Doing what?"

"I'm going to try and interrogate John Kramer. Obviously."

"Before you do that," Friedman said, "why don't you talk to Katherine Barnes, see what she has to say?"

"Who's Katherine Barnes?"

"Katherine Barnes is Charlie Quade's latest girlfriend. See, I've been researching the last few years of Charlie's life."

"What'd you find out?"

Friedman spent the next several minutes covering Charlie Quade's life from the time he lost his shield to the time of his death. It was a short story, and a sordid one. When he finished, Friedman tossed a slip of paper across the desk. "That's her address. Charlie's address, actually."

Charlie Quade's apartment house was about what I would have expected: a cheaply built building with a gaudy facade, located in a so-so part of town, the kind of neighborhood where a showy car and a free-spending style attracts a lot of favorable attention. The interior hallways were carpeted in emerald-green acrylic; the plaster of the hallway walls sparkled with glitter. It was a three-story building. At the head of each flight of stairs, plastic flowers attached to real manzanita branches were artfully arranged against mirrored wall tiles. But the manzanita was lacquered to a plasticlike gloss. And the "rocks" that completed the neo-rustic display were actually styrofoam.

As I pushed the bell button of Apartment 7, I noticed that there was no name card inserted in the brass slot above the button. Either Charlie had craved anonymity, or Katherine Barnes had removed the card as soon as she learned Charlie was dead.

Out of long habit, after ringing the bell, I stepped back, unbuttoned my corduroy jacket and raised my hand to waist

level, close to the butt of my service revolver. I was about to press the button a second time when I heard footsteps on the other side of the door. The tiny glass prism set into the door's peephole flickered.

"Yes?" It was a woman's voice. "Who's there?"

I identified myself, showed her my I.D. and told her why I'd come. I heard a pained sigh, then heard the rattle of a night chain, followed by the sound of a deadbolt lock turning, and another lock clicking.

Like Charlie's apartment house, Charlie's girlfriend was about what I'd expected: lots of show, but not much class. She was tall and long-legged. Her hair had been dyed to a dark, lusterless brown. The hair was elaborately piled on top of her head, secured by several rhinestone combs and clips. Her eyebrows were heavily drawn in black, her lips were heavily drawn in red. Her eyes were shadowed with iridescent green. Her long lashes were false. The skin of her face was blotched and pitted, covered over with layers of cheap makeup. Her red sweater and black toreador pants were tight-fitting, revealing in precise detail her breasts, her nipples, her buttocks, and the cleft of her pubis. But the curves were beginning to slip, and the flesh was beginning to sag. Her mouth was drawn into an expression of permanent displeasure, as if she were tasting something sour. Her eyes were narrowed, permanently suspicious. Like her mouth and eyes, her voice was hard and unfriendly.

"What is it? I'm packing, and I don't have much time."

"Are you leaving town?"

She nodded. "That's right. I'm going to L.A. I never should've left."

"Do you come from Los Angeles?"

With her hands on her hips, she raised one shoulder. "I've been in Los Angeles longer than I've been anywhere. I grew up in Chicago, though."

"How long did you live with Charlie Quade?"

She winced, as if the question caused her pain. "Two years. A little less, maybe. I forget."

"Can I sit down?" I gestured to the littered living room. "I won't take much of your time." Without waiting for her to reply I sat on one end of a naugahyde sofa, piled with boxes and transparent plastic garment bags.

Loudly sighing, exasperated, she sat in a straight-back chair, crossing her right leg over her left and drumming long, crimson fingernails on her knee.

"You aren't staying for Charlie's funeral," I said.

"No, I'm not." She fixed her eyes on the fake logs arranged in the fake fireplace. Accompanying her busy fingers, her right foot began bobbing impatiently.

"You don't seem exactly prostrated with grief."

"No, I'm not." She looked at me for a moment with her bitter eyes, then returned her gaze to the fireplace.

I let a long moment of silence pass while I stared at her, wondering whether I could rattle her with a cold, hard stare. I quickly discovered that I couldn't. She sat as before, silently hostile, implacably waiting for me to do what I'd come to do, then leave. Finally I decided to say, "You don't have much time, you say. So I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll tell you what I know about Charlie. That'll save time. Then you tell me what I've left out. Then, if everything fits, I'll be on my way. Fair?"

She looked at me again, shrugged, and looked away. "Sure. Why not?"

"What I know about Charlie divides into two parts," I said. "I know that, when he was a cop, he was almost always just one step ahead of an Internal Affairs man—and just a couple of steps ahead of a departmental reprimand. Finally it all caught up with him, and he was lucky to get out with his skin a couple of years ago. After that, he did what ex-policemen do. He worked for private investigators and private security companies. Eventually, he went into business for himself—just him and his desk space and his answering machine. He operated then the way he operated when he was a cop. He tried to cut corners and work hustles instead of settling down to do the job. He made a couple of shady scores,

but that was about it. I'm sure he borrowed two dollars for every dollar he earned.

"Then, six or eight months ago, he started doing odd jobs for Lester Bennett. Lester Bennett's specialty is child stealing for divorced parents—rich divorced parents. Charlie did some of Lester's surveillance for him. He was in the process of setting up John Kramer, Alexander Guest's grandson, when—"

At the mention of Guest's name, I saw her eyes flicker.

"Alexander Guest," I repeated. "You've heard of him."

Her eyes darted covertly to my face, then darted cautiously away. I decided to finish my story, then question her.

"But Lester Bennett decided he didn't want to take a chance, stealing Alexander Guest's grandson. So, instead, he told Guest what was happening, tipped Guest off that his grandson could be stolen. As a result, Guest hired Charlie to guard the boy, presumably to compensate Charlie for the surveillance work he lost when Bennett sold out his client. Maybe Charlie did other jobs for Guest, too. Anyhow, as it turned out, it was Charlie's last job, guarding John Kramer." I stopped speaking, waited for her to look at me, then said, "That's all I know. What else can you tell me?"

"Nothing."

I raised a forefinger, as if to warn her. "There's got to be something you can tell me."

Plainly puzzled, she frowned. "No. Honest, there's nothing."

"Listen, Miss Barnes—I've been working Homicide for a lot of years. And I can tell you that about half the time, in an unsolved murder, we find the answers we want in the details of the victim's life—the hour-to-hour, day-to-day, week-to-week details, that people take completely for granted. People like you—the ones who knew the victims best, saw him every day—you've got the answers we need."

"Every day—" She said it softly, bitterly. "God, sometimes I was lucky to see him once a week. Which was fine with

me. Except that he never left me money enough to do anything but buy a bottle of Gallo wine and a box of corn flakes."

"I always thought of Charlie as a big spender," I said, hoping to needle her into saying more than she intended.

"Big spender—" She snorted. "He spent big on himself. Big car, fancy clothes, throwing twenty dollar bills on the table up at Reno. But at home—" As she spoke, she looked resentfully around the cluttered living room, shaking her head. "Around here," she said, "he was a goddam miser."

"Still," I said quietly, "he's dead. You lived with him. I'd think that you'd at least want to go to his—"

"He's got kids," she flared. "He's got two kids, grown, and a wife who's always calling up for money, for God's sake. Let them go to his goddam funeral. Me, I spent all day yesterday hauling stuff down to the pawnshop to get enough money to buy a second-hand suitcase and a plane ticket out of town. And that's where I'm going, out of town. Tonight. And if that shocks you, then I'm sorry. But the truth is, I'd already decided that, the next time he went to New York, I was going to load up the stereo, and the TV, and whatever else I could pawn, and I was going to—"

"When did he go to New York?" I asked. "How often? What dates?"

"How should I know which dates? God, I'm lucky if he even left me enough money for newspapers, so I could—"

"Listen, Miss Barnes—" I sat forward on the rickety couch and dropped my voice to a harsh, official sounding note.

"Let's get something straight, you and I. Right now." I waited for her to look at me. Then: "I didn't think much of Charlie, either. I was responsible for getting him to turn in his shield, in fact. But Charlie's dead, and it's my job to find his murderer. And that's what I intend to do—find his murderer. Now, you probably know that we've got a suspect in custody. It's even money that he'll be indicted for the murder, and stand trial. So what I'm doing now—right now—is getting as much evidence as I can against the suspect. And what I need most of

all is connections between Charlie and the suspect. I also need to know everything I can find out about Charlie, especially about his activities during the past several months, when he got involved with Lester Bennett, and then with Alexander Guest. Now—" I let another beat pass, let my voice drop another slow, somber octave. "Now you might have information I need. You—"

"But I'm *telling* you what I know. I'm—"

"You're just hitting the high spots. I want details. Dates. I want you to cooperate—work with me, instead of against me. We've been at this for fifteen minutes, now, and all you've told me is how much you hated Charlie, and how cheap Charlie was. I've got to have more than that."

"But I don't *have* anything more," she wailed. "I'm trying to *tell* you that."

"And I'm telling you that you aren't trying hard enough. You aren't thinking. You're talking, but you aren't thinking." I broke off, giving the words time to penetrate. Then, locking my eyes with hers, I spoke slowly, distinctly. "Whether you know it or not, you have information I need, information I've got to have. That makes you a material witness in a homicide investigation. Do you know what that means?"

Her eyes narrowed; the small pink tip of her tongue circled bright red lips. Finally, I'd gotten her attention.

"That means," I said, "that, if I ask him to do it, the D.A. will stipulate that you can be held in custody until we're satisfied that we've got all the information that you—"

"But—Christ—I've told you everything I know. Everything. There's nothing more to tell. *Nothing.*"

"Maybe that's so, maybe it isn't. But if I were you—if you don't want to spend the night in custody—I'd start telling me, in detail, everything you know about Charlie's connection to Lester Bennett, and Alexander Guest, and Gordon Kramer. And John Kramer, too."

As I spoke, I saw her face begin to come apart. The hard-eyed, tough-talking street-corner defiance had deserted

her, left her suddenly defenseless, hopeless. I knew why. Katherine Barnes was a loser. She'd always been a victim—someone's victim, anyone's victim.

"You'd—" She swallowed. "You'd lock me up?"

"It doesn't have to come to that. Just tell me what you know. Everything you know. If you cooperate, I'll have someone drive you to the airport. We'll even help you haul things to the pawnshop, if that'll help."

I was prepared for her reaction. I knew that her lip would curl as she remembered all the other promises people like me had made—and then broken. I was also prepared for the hopeless sigh, the defeated sag of her shoulders, the resignation in her voice as she began talking.

"It's like I said—honest to God, I never knew anything about what he was doing, what he was working at. He never told me anything. The only thing he ever did was brag about all the deals he was going to make. Once in a while, though, he really would make a score. And then, maybe, we'd go out to dinner, or maybe he'd buy me something."

She paused, shaking her head as she remembered. "There was only one time, about a year ago, that he really did make a score. So he bought me an outfit, I remember—a real silk outfit. God knows where he got it, maybe someone stole it, and he bought it hot. But, anyhow, I remember we went out to dinner and a movie. I was wearing the silk outfit. So then, when we got home, here, he started drinking. I mean, *really* drinking, on top of all the wine we'd had, and the martinis. So then, naturally, he started knocking me around. And he bloodied my nose, bad. And it ruined the outfit." She shook her head, and bit her lip.

"In my whole life," she said, "It was the only real silk outfit I ever had. The only one."

"Did he knock you around a lot?"

She nodded. "All the time. Every time he got drunk. Really drunk. Which was once a month, at least. That's why I was leaving, see. Because he beat me up."

"I'm not surprised, that he'd knock you around." I

looked at her a moment, hopeful she'd believe that I was sorry for her. But, quickly, she looked away.

"The last two or three months," I said, "did Charlie brag about any big deal?"

"Yeah. Once. He went to New York a couple of times—two times. And after the first time, when he got drunk, he said that he was going to score big. He said he was going to get a Camaro, that time. But he never did."

"When was that—the first time he went to New York?"

"It was—lessee—" The tip of her pink tongue circled the red lips again. "This is September. So that was May, some time. Maybe the middle of May."

The middle of May . . .

Almost exactly the time Bennett told Guest that Kramer intended to steal John.

"Did Charlie ever mention Gordon Kramer, or Alexander Guest, or Lester Bennett?"

"Bennett, he mentioned. Off and on. I mean, I knew he worked for Bennett. I'd get messages from Bennett, every once in a while. And I heard him talking to Bennett on the phone a couple of times about Alexander Guest. At least, I think it was Guest they were talking about. I never paid much attention."

"Didn't you listen, when he was talking on the phone?"

Contemptuously, she shook her head. "Why should I listen? I didn't care what he was talking about. I couldn't care less what he was talking about."

"During the last few weeks, did Charlie seem nervous about anything? Apprehensive?"

"Well—" Once more the pink tongue circled the bright red lips. "I wouldn't say he was nervous, exactly. I mean, Charlie was always—you know—always bragging about how he could always take care of himself, and everything. But, now that you mention it, I remember that, the second time he came back from New York, he seemed kind of—you know—kind of quiet. Like he was thinking things over, sort of."

"Was he worried, would you say?"

She shrugged, then tentatively nodded. "I guess I'd say he was as worried as he ever got."

"Did he talk about why he was worried?"

"Not to me, he didn't. But I did hear him on the phone, once, saying something about how he didn't like being put in the middle."

"What'd he mean by that, do you think?"

She shrugged again. "Search me."

"He was talking about his business in New York, though, when he said it?"

"I thought so. But I could be wrong. Like I said, I never paid any attention to—"

At my belt, my electronic pager buzzed. Using Charlie Quade's phone, I dialed Communications, and was put through to Friedman.

"I was just about to go home," he said, "when Diane Kramer called. She's Gordon Kramer's wife, and she just got in town, apparently. She wants to talk to whoever's in charge. She's staying at the Saint Francis, room 1204. I thought that one of us should talk to her."

"I'll do it." I wrote *St Fran 1204* in my notebook. "I'm finished here."

"Did you do any good?"

"Maybe. I'm not sure."

TEN

"I'VE GOT NOTHING TO HIDE," DIANE KRAMER SAID. "NOTHING AT all. And neither has Gordon. John's his son. And Gordon has a perfect right to—"

"Listen, Mrs. Kramer. It's Sunday. I'm supposed to be off duty. I'd *rather* be off duty. I'm here because Lieutenant Friedman said you wanted to see someone in charge. Well, I'm in charge. And I'm here. I'm ready to hear whatever you've got to say. But I'm not going to listen to you tell me about your husband's rights. Not on my day off. Do you understand?"

For a moment Diane Kramer didn't reply; she simply stared at me with cold, clear eyes. She looked to be in her late twenties: a slim woman, medium height, with a narrow torso, small breasts, long legs. Her features were regular, pleasing but not pretty. Her ash-blond hair was coiled severely on top of her head. She was obviously intelligent, obviously determined. Her movements and her mannerisms revealed a kind of taut, impatient restlessness, tempered by a hard-edged confidence and self-control. She struck me as a fighter, a possessor. She would fight for her husband instinctively, simply because he was hers. Diane Kramer was the New York version of the liberated woman: quick-thinking, quick-talking, quick-acting. Sitting in a straight-back chair, long, silken legs crossed,

dressed in an expensive wool travel suit, she looked like a fast-rising female executive. She spoke crisply and concisely, unsmiling.

"All right," she said, "as long as your time is so valuable, why don't you tell me what you want to know, which questions you want answered?"

"I'd like to know everything about your husband. Anything and everything. Starting at the beginning, and ending the last time you saw him."

She thought about the request for a moment. Then she shrugged, signifying that she had nothing to lose by telling the story. "I've known Gordon for four years. I met him when I went to work for him, as his secretary. That was just before he moved to San Francisco—with his wife and son. There were two of us running the New York office after he left. From the first time I saw Gordon, I liked him—a lot. Maybe it was because we came from similar backgrounds. We're both Jewish, both from poor families. We both grew up in New York—in the wrong neighborhoods. Gordon's father died when Gordon was five years old, and his mother's health was always bad. So Gordon had to work from the time he was twelve. It was the same with me. I always worked. All the way through C.C.N.Y. I worked. When Gordon was sixteen, he started with a bail bondsman, doing odd jobs. Two years later, he was working for a small loan company. By the time he was twenty-one, he was managing the business. When he was twenty-five, he started his own small loan business. Then he got into venture capital. By the time he was thirty, he was working on his second million, maybe his third or fourth million. About that time he—"

"Excuse me. What's venture capital, exactly?"

"It's investment banking on a small scale. He invests in small businesses, new businesses, and takes a piece of the business in lieu of cash repayment on the loan. If the business makes it big, so does Gordon. If the business fails, it's a writeoff. Right from the start, he was a success—a big success. About that time, when he was thirty years old, he

met Marie Guest. She'd just divorced her first husband, a man named Beresford, who had married her for her money."

"How long have you and Kramer been married?"

"About two years."

"When did Kramer decide he wanted to take John?"

"Do you mean take him physically? Or try to get custody through the courts?"

"I mean physically."

"About six months ago, I'd say. Gordon was divorced three years ago. The divorce almost ruined him—financially, and emotionally. I don't know how Guest did it. Gordon never talked about it. But, somehow Guest forced Gordon to leave San Francisco, permanently. So Gordon went back to New York, where he still had an office—where I was still working. He began working like a madman, to forget about his wife, and Guest, and his son. We started going out together. Then—" Momentarily she hesitated, obviously reluctant to venture into intimacies. "Then I moved in. I quit working for him, and moved in. Except that—" Her lips curved in a tight smile. "Except that I never saw him, he was working so hard. We lived together for six months, and then we got married. We—" She broke off again as her gaze wandered thoughtfully away. I saw her eyes soften. In that moment, with her vulnerability fleetingly revealed, I felt the tension between us easing.

"You're happily married, then."

She nodded. "Yes. It—" She swallowed. "It's like I said before. We understand each other. We always have." She paused again, her eyes still soft, lost in memory. Then, bringing herself back to the present, she began speaking more concisely.

"As long as we were living together, it never seemed to bother Gordon that he couldn't see John. He never talked about it. Sometimes I'd ask, but he'd always close me off. But then, when we got married, he started to talk about it, about how much he missed John, and how much he wanted to see him. But for a while, I thought that, mostly, it was anger and

not love for John. He'd always say that Guest took everything from him—his money, his business, even his son."

"He didn't blame his wife, then. Only his father-in-law."

She nodded. "Gordon's never been angry at Marie. From the first, almost, he thought of her as a victim. Just like he was a victim—he, and John, too. It got to be—" She broke off, shaking her head. "It got to be an obsession with Gordon, what Guest was doing to him. That's part of the reason, I think, that he wanted so badly to take John. He was determined—absolutely determined—that Guest wasn't going to turn John against him. So last February, I think it was, he came to San Francisco, secretly. He saw John—waited outside John's school, and took him for a ride in his car. They were only together for a half hour. But, God, that half hour changed Gordon. I met him at the airport, when he came home. And it was pathetic, almost, to hear him talk. I remember feeling sorry for him, and also a little scared for him, too. I mean, the experience of seeing John made him frantic, almost. He said that, once he got John, he'd take him out of the country, if he had to do it. He'd even made plans. He transferred money to a Swiss bank account. A lot of money."

"You say he saw John secretly. Why secretly? He had visitation rights. He wasn't breaking any laws, seeing his own son."

"I know. I asked him the same question. He said that he'd've had to get his wife's permission for the visitation. And he didn't want to go through that."

"Did you know he'd hired Lester Bennett to steal the boy?"

"Yes. But he also told me that Bennett reneged. That's when he started making his own plans."

"Was he working with anyone, planning to steal John this time? Was anyone helping him?"

"No. No one. He was going to do it himself, this time. All by himself."

"Did he ever mention Charlie Quade?"

"No. Never. That's—" She blinked. "That's the man who was killed."

"That's right, Mrs. Kramer. That's the victim." I paused, thinking about what she'd said earlier—and thinking, too, about Katherine Barnes, Charlie's permanently damaged girlfriend. "Another victim," I said. "There's a lot of them in this case."

"But only one dead."

"That's right," I answered. "Only one dead."

"Who was he, this Charlie Quade? I don't even know."

"He was a private detective. When Alexander Guest discovered that your husband intended to take John, Guest hired guards to protect the boy. He hired a guard, full time, at Marie's house. And, when he took John on the weekends, he hired Charlie Quade. Did you know that—know that John was guarded, day and night?"

"No. And I don't think Gordon knew, either."

"I think he did. At least, he knew there was a guard at Marie's house—a full-time guard."

She didn't reply. Instead she asked, "When can I see Gordon? I brought a lawyer with me. Lieutenant Friedman said that, after I talked to you, I could see Gordon—me, and the lawyer, too."

Instead of answering, I said, "There's one thing about this case that puzzles me. Maybe you can help me with it."

She eyed me cautiously for a moment, then said, "I'll try. What is it?"

"Your husband is a successful businessman. He's got rights, as a citizen, and he's got rights as a father. Now, I can see how Alexander Guest, with his connections, could intimidate almost anyone. I can also understand how hard it would be, to win in court against him. After all, he's one of the best trial lawyers in the country. Even if he wouldn't plead his own case, he'd have the very best legal talent available, pleading for him.

"But, as I say, your husband has rights, especially as a father. And he's aware of these rights. So I don't understand

how Guest could flatten him out so completely. It seems like Kramer just rolled over and played dead. And that doesn't sound like him—not according to the way you describe him. And not according to my impression of him, either. To me, he looks like a fighter. Not a quitter."

"Gordon's no quitter," she said. "You're right, he's a fighter. But—" She looked away. Tension tightened her face as she decided how to answer. "But Gordon made mistakes. And Guest—" She hesitated. Then suddenly, resolutely, she shook her head. "That's got nothing to do with John, or this—this Quade murder. And I don't want to—"

Once again, my electronic beeper began shrieking. When I asked to use her phone she agreed. Then she asked again when she could see her husband. I glanced at my watch. The time was 4:10 P.M.

"As soon as I can talk to Lieutenant Friedman, I'll tell him to authorize it. How long will you be in town?"

"I'm not sure. I might have to go back to New York tomorrow, to see about money for Gordon's defense."

I nodded, went to the phone and dialed Communications. Moments later, Friedman came on the line.

"I have a surprise for you," he said. "Can you talk?"

"No."

"Well, it doesn't matter. This isn't classified. It's just a surprise."

"You sound like Canelli, building the suspense."

"Oh, God," he groaned. "Comparing me to Canelli. I thought we were buddies."

"What's the surprise?"

"The surprise is, you've got a lunch date tomorrow. With Alexander Guest. You're to be at Jason's at 12:30."

Jason's . . .

One of the city's best, most expensive restaurants, famous throughout the world. I remember reading that Alexander Guest held court at Jason's every day for lunch, always at the same table, reserved only for him.

"Well, I said, "you're right. I'm surprised." I glanced at

Diane Kramer, who was sitting as before, thoughtfully staring out the window at a cable car coming down the Powell Street Hill. "What's the background?"

"There's no background, really. At least, not that I know about. He called an hour ago, and asked for you. I said you were out in the field, and wouldn't be back, probably. He asked for your home phone, which I refused to divulge, naturally. Then he ordered me to instruct you to appear at Jason's tomorrow. I hope you've got a clean shirt."

"I hope so, too."

ELEVEN

"TRY THE REX SOLE," ALEXANDER GUEST ADVISED. "IT'S THE house speciality."

"Thanks, but I think I'll have the breast of chicken."

"Wine?"

"No, thanks."

"You don't drink?"

"No," I answered. Then, remembering Marie Kramer, and wondering what his response might be, I decided to say, "I used to drink, too much. I had to quit."

"Almost everyone I know drinks too much. Including myself."

I made no reply.

"Are you A.A.?"

I shook my head. "No. I should've joined. It would've been easier, I think. But I didn't."

"You don't share your problems with others." It was a statement, not a question. Alexander Guest had made another pronouncement.

"I suppose that's right. I hadn't ever thought of it that way."

As if he'd expected the answer, Guest nodded perfunctorily, acknowledging what he obviously considered a compli-

ment. Then, still looking at me with his impersonal gray eyes, he said, "You're an atypical policeman, Lieutenant. Most policemen are very narrow, very suspicious, not very sensitive. You're a different breed, it seems to me. What's your background?" He asked the question brusquely, as if he were cross-examining me, and expected an immediate answer.

Toying with my fork, I smiled to myself. Then I shrugged. Even though it was a story that I seldom told, I somehow felt no resentment at the question, no reluctance to answer him. I felt as if he were challenging me to a contest. To win, I had only to do the unexpected, and answer honestly. "I played football in high school, here in San Francisco. In my senior year, I was all-state halfback. That got me a football scholarship to Stanford. After I graduated, I played pro ball for two years, with the Detroit Lions. I was always just ahead of the cut, though, and when I got my knee injured, they dropped me. About that time, my marriage started to come apart."

"You say you were on a football scholarship. Does that mean you were born poor?" As he spoke, a sardonic smile teased one corner of his mouth.

"I suppose it does. My father was a small-time realtor, here in the city. When I was fifteen, he cleaned out his bank account and left town with his 'girl Friday.' My mother went to work for Sears, selling ladies' dresses."

"What about your father? What happened to him?"

Deciding whether to answer, I looked at him silently for a moment. He was still playing his little game, still challenging me to tell him the truth. It was a game that only he could win.

Yet, for the same perverse reason that I began the story, I decided to finish it. "He and his girl Friday went to Texas. My father always drove big cars—too fast. They were killed in west Texas, in a head-on collision." I drew a deep breath, then added, "He was driving a Packard. But it turned out that he was behind three payments."

"And you're bitter."

"Yes. I'm bitter. Still."

"The other night, you said you had two teenage children. Are they still in Detroit?"

"Yes." I hesitated again, then decided to say, "My wife was—is—a socialite. She got married again—to a socialite."

"You don't think much of socialites."

I shifted my grip on the fork, and began eating a tossed green salad. "No," I answered, "I don't think much of socialites."

"My daughter is a socialite. Or, at least, she came out. It was her mother's idea, not mine." He smiled. "When I think about it, my side of the family couldn't qualify for the social register. So we're at about the same rung on the ladder, you and I."

"Except that you're richer."

He nodded, picked up his own fork, and began eating his own salad. "That's true," he said, "I'm richer. No question." He said it matter-of-factly, as if he were acknowledging that, yes, certain people were naturally superior to others, and therefore were entitled to more—of everything.

We ate for a time in silence. As I ate, I looked at the diners, the waiters, at the interior of Jason's. The customers were about what I'd expected: successful-looking men and beautiful-looking women, most of them so sure of themselves and their status that they didn't bother trying to impress each other. They simply ate, and talked quietly. The waiters, dressed in tuxedoes, were also sure of their status. They were businesslike and quietly attentive, but never servile. The interior of the restaurant was less ostentatious than I'd imagined: turn-of-the-century dark wood paneling, simple white paint above the plate rail. But the thick white damask tablecloths, generous white linen napkins, gleaming silverware and sparkling goblets established Jason's claim to world-class fame. The food—and the prices—confirmed the claim.

Guest and I were alone at the large round corner table that had been set for six. I'd read that, whenever Guest was in town, holding court, his table was always filled with the rich and the famous.

Yet, today, it was obvious that no one else was expected.

Why?

As if he'd sensed the question, Guest said, "You know, of course, why I wanted to talk to you."

"You want to find out what progress we're making."

He nodded to me, at the same time thanking a waiter named Paul for serving the entrée. "Exactly," Guest said, smiling at me over his raised wine glass. I raised my water glass. Then, while we ate, I gave him an edited version of the Quade investigation. At intervals, Guest nodded sagaciously, as if to compliment me for coming to conclusions that, of course, had always been obvious to him. Twice he scrawled something on an envelope. When I finished, he sat silently for a moment, nodding thoughtfully. Finally, glancing at the notes, he said, "It's interesting that Kramer would think to wipe his fingerprints from the gun, but wasn't smart enough to ditch the gun farther from the scene. He was apprehended in Oakland. He could've thrown the gun off the Bay Bridge."

"I know. I wondered about that, too."

"Have you queried him on that point?"

I hesitated, then decided to say, "I think Lieutenant Friedman asked him about it."

Guest waited for our coffee to be served, then asked, "When's the case going to the grand jury?"

"I don't know. That's up to the D.A."

"Is your investigation complete?"

"A case like this is never closed, Mr. Guest. Not until the trial starts, and sometimes not even then. In fact, there're a couple of points that I wanted to check with you."

"I was sure you would. That's one reason I invited you to lunch. More coffee?"

"No, thanks."

"Before you start, ah, grilling me, Lieutenant—" Plainly amused by the image of himself being questioned by an ordinary policeman, he permitted himself a small smile. "Before you start, there're a few things that I'd like to tell

you, by way of unburdening myself. Obviously, at four o'clock Saturday morning, we couldn't cover all the pertinent details, especially since neither of us knew exactly what really happened."

I nodded, but decided to say nothing.

"At that time," he continued, "I remember telling you a little about Marie's marriage to Kramer—and their subsequent divorce. The reason I did it is, of course, self-evident. Their marital problems are the root cause of what's happened. However, as I thought back on it, I realized that you were probably puzzled by some of the things I said."

"As a matter of fact, I—"

"Wait." He raised an abrupt, authoritative hand, at the same time glancing pointedly at his watch. "Let me finish, please. Then I'll take your questions."

I nodded again, agreeing. Why, I wondered, did the phrase *Then I'll take your questions* sound so familiar? The answer seemed to sum up the situation: It was the same phrase the President often used, opening a Washington press conference.

"I might've mentioned to you that, when Marie and Kramer were married, I had Kramer checked out—thoroughly. And, to put it mildly, the report I got back was a shock. I discovered that, since his early twenties, Kramer was connected to organized crime in New York."

I sat up straighter. "Are you sure?"

"I'm positive. His first job was with a bail bondsman. Obviously, organized crime has infiltrated the bail bond business, especially in New York. Just as obviously, they're constantly looking for ways of infiltrating other legitimate businesses, especially businesses that can launder money from drug trafficking and gambling and vice. They're also looking for people like Kramer: Young, smart, ambitious men who can learn how to dress, and talk, and act—who can learn, in a word, how to pass for legitimate businessmen.

"So they set Kramer up in a small loan business, which was really a front for loan sharking. Kramer learned fast—

very fast, I'm told. From the first, apparently, he was smart enough to keep a safe distance from the mob, or the Mafia, or whatever term is current. He never let them take him over completely, never totally became their creature. Which is why, when it came time to leave New York, he didn't have any trouble getting turned loose. Because he was never a part of organized crime, you see. Not an integral part. He simply worked for them, like thousands of others.

"From the small loan business, he went into venture capital, so called. Which, of course, was ideal for laundering large sums of money. It was also the perfect means of gaining control of all manner of businesses, since venture capitalists usually take a percentage of the businesses they fund, rather than ask for repayment of seed capital."

"How long were they married, before you discovered all this?"

"About three months, I'd say. They got married at City Hall, unannounced."

"Did you tell your daughter what you found out?"

"Naturally."

"Did she believe you?"

He nodded. "Yes, she did. Whatever Marie's faults, she's intelligent. And she's also a realist. She doesn't believe in dodging issues, or deluding herself. However, as it turned out, she was pregnant when they got married. Which, of course, made the whole exercise moot."

"You'd intended to break up the marriage. Until you discovered your daughter was pregnant. Is that what you mean by 'moot?'"

"Yes," he answered coldly, staring at me with his ice-blue eyes. "Yes, that's exactly right. Obviously, a change in tactics was indicated. One doesn't put pressure on a marriage that's about to produce one's first grandchild—probably one's only grandchild. So I took the only course that seemed feasible. I made it very attractive for Kramer to relocate his venture capital business in San Francisco."

"Why do you say the 'only course?' Couldn't you have continued to try and break them up?"

"I've just explained, Lieutenant, that I wanted their marriage to work, because of John. I'm not an ogre. I'm a realist, but not an ogre. Additionally, once John was born, I wanted him close to me, obviously. And, as long as it was workable, I wanted Marie and Kramer together, as I've already said. Which meant offering incentives for them to come to San Francisco. And, of course, Kramer was smart enough to recognize the advantages of taking my offer. Among other things, it allowed him to shake off his ties with organized crime, which he was anxious to do. Kramer is smart. He's tough, too. I'll give him that. And he's a quick study. A *very* quick study."

"If he's so smart, and so tough," I said, "how did it happen that you were able to run him out of town so easily? It must've taken more than threatening to expose his Mafia connections."

He looked at me thoughtfully. "Why would you say that? I'm curious."

"Because it sounds like he had himself covered. Right from the first."

Approvingly, he nodded, then smiled indulgently. "Very good, Lieutenant. As I said earlier, you're an atypical policeman."

"Even a typical policeman could figure that one out." I didn't return his smile.

He sat silently for a moment, studying me. Finally he said, "You're right, of course. It did take more. A lot more."

I decided not to say anything in return. He knew what I wanted: an answer to the riddle.

He was staring off across the quiet restaurant now, obviously deciding how much to tell me. Finally he said, "I'm going to take you into my confidence, Lieutenant. That is to say, I'm going to tell you some things that, frankly, I wish I didn't have to talk about. I'm not proud of them. However—" He drew a deep breath and looked again at his watch. Then,

speaking faster, in the clipped accents of a lawyer summarizing his case for the jury, he said, "The reason I could 'run him out of town,' as you say, is simply that, in the vernacular, I made it my business to get the goods on him. Old habits die hard, you know. He cut some corners, doing business in San Francisco. I found out what he'd done, and documented it." He paused. It was a taut, meaningful silence. Then: "When you realize that, as a lawyer, I'm an officer of the court, you'll realize how difficult it is for me to admit that to you, to a fellow officer of the law. However, you'll also realize why I'm doing it. I want you to hear the facts from me. Not from someone else."

"Are you saying that Kramer broke the law? Committed a crime?"

He nodded. "That's what I'm saying."

"Did you get this information after the divorce? Or before?"

"I got it before. Call it a precautionary measure. I always distrusted Kramer, always suspected that he'd cause me trouble. As it turned out, I was right." He hesitated, then said, "I'm being candid with you, Lieutenant. I hope you appreciate that. And I hope you respect my confidence." He sat silently for a moment, eyeing me speculatively as he toyed with the stem of his wine glass. His fingernails, I noticed, had been manicured. He was dressed in a beautifully tailored double-breasted gray flannel suit. His white shirt and stiff collar gleamed. His gray-on-gray silk tie was impeccably knotted. His gray hair was beautifully barbered, meticulously styled. His expression, as before, was sardonic. His lips were curved in a slightly supercilious smile. His eyes, coldly unrevealing, never left mine.

"I should probably make it clear," he said, "that we're not talking about your kind of crime, Lieutenant. Nobody got killed. Nobody got hurt. We're talking about white collar crime. Specifically, falsification of assets for the purpose of borrowing operating capital. Fraud, in other words. It happens every day, believe me."

"He could've gone to jail, though, if you'd given the information to the D.A. Is that it?"

Guest nodded. "Yes, he could've gone to jail. Not for long. But long enough."

"But, ultimately, it didn't work. He came back to see his son. Then he hired Lester Bennett to steal John." I decided not to go on. I wanted to see how Guest would respond. Would he tell me, voluntarily, about Bennett warning him that John might be taken?

"And then Bennett told me of Kramer's plans." The supercilious smile widened almost imperceptibly. He'd anticipated my tactic, and finessed it. "Or didn't he tell you?"

"Yes," I admitted, "he told me."

"And did Bennett also tell you that I hired Charlie Quade to work for me, on his suggestion?"

I nodded. "That, too." Then, continuing the game, I said, "And Charlie's girlfriend told me you hired him to go to New York." It was a lie, but a safe one.

His eyes flickered momentarily. Had I caught him by surprise?

"Charlie talked too much." He spoke quietly, ominously.

I didn't answer, and after a moment of calculating silence he said, "She's right. When Bennett told me what Kramer was planning, I hired Quade to go to New York and threaten him." He eyed me for another calculating moment before he said, "I mentioned earlier that I intended to unburden myself. Now you know what I meant."

"What'd you threaten him with? Physical harm?"

Instead of answering directly, he said, "The case of fraud I mentioned involved a company called Generex. Basically, Quade's mission was to get on an airplane, and go to New York, and tell Kramer that the Generex file was still active."

"Just that? Nothing more?"

He nodded. "Just that. But the implication is, you see, that others know about the file, except me. Kramer would wonder how many others."

"Quade seems an odd choice for a job like that."

He shrugged. "He was handy. And I felt I owed Bennett something."

"Couldn't you simply have called Kramer? It would've served the same purpose."

"Almost the same purpose, not quite. I also instructed Quade to imply that, should Kramer come back to San Francisco, Quade and a couple of others like him would break Kramer's legs for him. He'd stand trial for fraud with his legs in casts." He smiled, subtly taunting me. "I'll deny I ever made that statement, of course. But I want to be perfectly candid with you, as I've said."

"You did threaten him with physical harm, then."

"Only if he came back to San Francisco. As long as he stayed in New York, he had no problem."

"Would you actually have done it—hired people to break Kramer's legs?"

He shrugged. "Probably not. But, of course, Kramer didn't know that."

"Had you hired Charlie to bodyguard John when he went to New York?"

"Yes."

"Did Quade tell Kramer he was John's bodyguard?"

"I've no way of knowing."

I nodded. "It doesn't appear that Quade was very successful, scaring Kramer off."

"Obviously. On the other hand, Kramer didn't succeed in stealing John."

"He would have succeeded, if Quade hadn't interfered—and gotten killed."

"Yes," Guest answered, "that's probably true. But the point is, you see, that he *did* interfere. He was doing his job."

"About that night—Friday night—there're a couple of points I'd like to clear up with you."

"What points are those?" He glanced at his watch again, then signaled for the check. My time was running out.

"The number of shots," I said. "You say—you're positive—that four shots were fired. Is that correct?"

He nodded. "Of course. Four."

"The physical evidence bears you out. Four shots were fired. But Kramer says only three shots were fired."

"Kramer also says he didn't kill Quade."

"He would lie about that, of course, assuming he's the murderer. But why would he lie about the number of shots?"

"Have you asked him?" Using a gold pen, he signed the check.

"Once," I answered. "I'll ask him again."

"Do that. Either way, it doesn't seem critical." He pushed back his chair. "Is there anything else, Lieutenant?"

"One thing—" I pushed back my own chair, but didn't rise. I saw his eyes narrow slightly.

"What's that?"

"I have to talk with John."

Instantly, his face hardened. On the white damask tablecloth, the fingers of one hand tightened. "You've already done that, Lieutenant."

"I only talked to him for a few minutes. I didn't mention the crime. The D.A. wants an interrogation. A complete interrogation."

"An interrogation concerning Quade's murder?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because John's an eyewitness at the scene of the crime."

He slowly shook his head—just once. It was a practiced mannerism, calculated to intimidate. And it succeeded. In that moment, Alexander Guest seemed to grow larger than life. More than merely a man, he became a presence, an irresistible force.

"I don't want you to interrogate John," he said. "You'll do him harm. I've got a psychiatrist's opinion—two opinions, in fact—to that effect. It's obvious that he's had a shock, witnessing a murder. It's also obvious that his father has brainwashed him, told him what to say. So, when you interrogate him, you're bound to produce conflicts, since the

truth differs from what his father told him to say. And that kind of conflict can obviously be traumatic. Especially when, literally, his testimony could mean life or death for his own father." He paused, a long, ponderous silence. Then: "What you're proposing, Lieutenant, could irreparably damage John's mental health. And I oppose it."

"You're assuming that Kramer's lying. It could be that he's telling the truth. And if that's the case, then John would be helping his father, not harming him."

Measuring his words with icy precision, he said, "Either Kramer is lying, or I'm lying, Lieutenant. What's your preference?"

"That's not necessarily the choice, Mr. Guest. You're telling me what you saw, and what you heard. And the facts certainly seem to back you up. But it's possible that Kramer's telling the truth, too. It's possible that both of you could be telling the truth." I let a beat pass, then said, "What I'm saying is, it's possible that something else happened Friday night—something neither you nor Kramer saw, or heard. And that's what I've got to find out—whether something like that could have happened."

"If Kramer is telling the truth when he says that he was outside the house on the driveway when the shots were fired," he said, "and if we deal with the facts as we know them to be, then there's only two possibilities. Either Quade killed himself, or else I killed him."

"Those facts could change, though. There could be something we don't know, another piece to the puzzle."

He rose to his feet, and I did the same. I hesitated, then said, "You should know, Mr. Guest, that I intend to interrogate John. Of course, his mother will be with him. But I have the right to interrogate him. Legally, I have the right. And you know it, sir."

Standing with his head lifted, shoulders sharply squared, arms rigid at his sides, he looked at me for a last long, larger-than-life moment. If he were in uniform, he could have been a general of the army, posing for a portrait.

"The law is a living thing, Lieutenant. It has its slaves, and it has its masters." He let another moment of regal silence pass. "And the slaves never win. They protest, sometimes. They can cause problems, sometimes, for their masters. But in the long run, they never win."

He thanked me for my company at lunch, turned on his heel and left the restaurant. A blue Cadillac waited for him at the curb.

TWELVE

WHEN I JOINED THE HOMICIDE SQUAD, CAPTAIN KRIEGER WAS the boss. Friedman was the second in command, with two sergeants and fifteen inspectors working under him. When Krieger had a heart attack and died, at age fifty-two, I was the senior sergeant. Everyone assumed that Friedman would be promoted to captain, and I'd make lieutenant. Everyone was only partly right. I made lieutenant, but Friedman declined to take the captaincy when it was offered. His reasoning was typical. He didn't like departmental politics, and he didn't like departmental politicians. Besides, he said, his home was paid for, his only son was halfway through college, and his wife had come into a sizeable inheritance. Result: For the last several years, Friedman and I had run the homicide squad as co-lieutenants.

When Friedman declined the captaincy, he also declined Krieger's large corner office. After a short interdepartmental tug of war, the office fell to me, along with Krieger's outsize desk and his large, leather-upholstered chair, both handed down from Krieger's predecessor. I knew Friedman coveted the chair, and I offered it to him. He thought about the offer, then declined it. The chair, he said, would provide for his

comfort whenever he decided to walk down the hallway and instruct me in the art of solving homicides.

Now, leaning back in my visitor's chair and lacing his fingers over the bulge of his vest, Friedman listened to the last of my report on my lunch with Alexander Guest.

"I don't think," Friedman said, "that we should get all bogged down in who's going to suffer, if we interview this kid. If we start playing the lawyer's game and the pyschiatrist's game, it'll never end. There's been a murder, and the kid was probably a witness. We're cops. We investigate homicides. Which means we interrogate witnesses. What happens afterwards, in court, that's not our problem. Whether this kid makes it to the witness stand, that's between the D.A. and the judge. Whether the kid's little psyche is bruised—" He spread his hands. "That's his problem, and his family's problem. So let's let the lawyers hassle, and the psychiatrists argue. That's their job, that's what they're paid for. Our job is to investigate—to find out who murdered Charlie Quade. And the deeper we get into the investigation, the more it appears that John could have the answers. So—" He waved an airy hand. "So we go to the mother and explain that, doing our lawful duty, we've got to interrogate her son—in her presence. Either she agrees, or we charge her with obstructing."

I snorted. "Will you be the one who turns the key on Alexander Guest's daughter?"

He grinned like a sly, overweight pixie. Meaning that, yes, Friedman would turn the key. More and more, lately, Friedman enjoyed taking on the establishment, win or lose. His targets were usually "the goddam politicians," inside and outside the police department, inside and outside politics. When I asked him why he did it, his response, typically, was a quip. His wife, he said, had just gotten the second half of her inheritance.

Without having to ask I knew that, to Friedman, Alexander Guest was the perfect target, the ultimate goddam politician.

"We've got to give them time to think about it," I said. "We can't just go over to Marie Kramer's house and tell . . ."

"Stringfellow wants to have the kid's testimony before he goes to the grand jury," Friedman interrupted. "He's told us that. Right?"

"Right."

"And Stringfellow is the one who runs the D.A.'s office while the D.A. is drinking martinis and making after-dinner speeches. Right?"

I nodded.

"Now let's suppose," Friedman said, "that Guest decides to take John to the Menninger Clinic, or maybe Switzerland, or wherever, to have his anxieties checked out. What happens to Stringfellow's case then?"

"I don't know what'll happen to the case. But if Guest takes the kid out of town after we make a demand for interrogation, and if the mother lets the kid go, then she's guilty of obstructing."

As if he were an all-knowing teacher complimenting a backward pupil, Friedman raised a congratulatory forefinger. "That's it exactly. So the thing for you to do, right now, is strike the first blow. You've got to make the mother realize that, legally, she has to let us question the kid. You've also got to make her realize that, if she lets Guest take the kid out of town once the demand for interrogation is made, she's in big trouble. So you should drive over to Marie Kramer's house, right now, and make your demand. You should take Canelli, as your witness. While you're doing that, I'll call a couple of friends in New York, and see what they say about Kramer. I'll also do a background check on Marie Kramer's live-in bodyguard. What's his name again?"

"Durkin. Bruce Durkin."

"Right." He made a note of the name. "Then I'll take Kramer through his story again, with his lawyer present. Okay?"

I nodded. "Okay." I got to my feet. "By the way, what's the word on the ownership of the murder weapon?"

"By the time you get back, I should know. If I don't hear from Washington in an hour, I'll call them again. I just called an hour ago, but a computer was down, or something."

I called for Canelli to get my car, clipped my service revolver to my belt and began shuffling through the papers on my desk, looking for Marie Kramer's address.

THIRTEEN

"JEEZ," CANELLI SAID, GESTURING TO MARIE KRAMER'S HOUSE, then expanding the gesture to include the rest of it: Telegraph Hill, the downtown skyscrapers set so dramatically against the vivid blue of San Francisco Bay, the long, low curve of the Bay Bridge, the hills of Berkeley in the background.

"Jeez," Canelli repeated, "that's a million-dollar view, Lieutenant." He gestured again toward the house, rising tier upon tier up the sharp slope of the hill. "That's what that house cost, I bet. A million dollars. At least."

"At least."

"I read somewhere that the rich are different," Canelli said, his swarthy brow earnestly furrowed as he stared at the house. "And, you know, when you see a place like this, or a place like Alexander Guest's place, you realize that it's true. The rich *are* different. Aren't they?"

As I nodded, I was thinking of my ex-wife, and her industrialist father and his factory in Detroit, and his mansion in Grosse Pointe.

The rich . . .

When I'd married Carolyn, I was still playing professional football. But one illegal block thrown by a Green Bay Packer changed my life, and when I got out of the hospital I

went to work for my father-in-law. I had a corner office with a leather couch. My secretary had graduated from Boston University and gone to Katherine Gibbs. Supposedly, I was doing "public relations." Actually, I met important visitors at the airport, got them settled in their hotels and generally catered to their preference in food, drink—and women. After the first year, I realized that I had a drinking problem. Sometime during the second year, standing blearily at the bar of the Book Cadillac while I watched an important visitor paw a girl I'd hired for the evening, I realized that I'd become a pimp. I left the important visitor and drove home. I woke Carolyn up, and told her that I was through. I told her we were going to give our house back to her father, and pack up our things and take the children to San Francisco.

She sat up in bed, looked at me with sleepy contempt and yawned in my face. Then she told me that she was in love with another man. She was going to divorce me, she said. She'd already seen a lawyer.

A week later, at breakfast, hung over, I was served with divorce papers. It had been a beautiful Sunday morning in June, and Carolyn and I were eating on our flagstone patio. The process server had come through the garden gate, left open for him.

The next morning my father-in-law called me into his office and fired me. As I left his office, his secretary gave me a blank envelope. Inside I found an airline ticket and a five figure check.

"You're right, Canelli," I said, swinging the car door open. "The rich are different. No question."

At 3:30 on a Monday afternoon, nothing had changed at the Kramer house except the outfit Marie was wearing. Bruce Durkin was his same surly, burly self, admitting us. The high-styled living room looked the same. The coffee cup was the same, too, placed so innocuously beside Marie Kramer. And, yes, the same sounds of a TV cartoon were coming from John's

room. We'd arrived in time, then, before Guest could take the boy away.

Friedman and I had decided on my strategy. I'd simply walk into the house, introduce Canelli, then say, casually, that I wanted to have a short talk with John, "for the record." I'd also remind Marie that I'd promised to show her son how my handcuffs worked.

As soon as I made the request, Marie Kramer frowned with apparent perplexity, as if she hadn't understood exactly what I'd said. Still frowning, she looked first at me, then at Canelli, then finally back to me. Today, obviously, she'd had more to drink than she'd had two days ago.

"Do you remember—remember—?" She shook her head in a wide, bemused arc. She couldn't recall what she'd wanted to say. Then, suddenly: "Carmody. Michael Carmody. Do you remember him? He's one of my father's assistants—one of several, of course. Several assistants." She privately nodded, pleased with what she'd said, pleased that she'd remembered the name.

"I remember him, yes. I saw him Saturday. Here."

"Right. That's right." She nodded loosely, as if the muscles in her neck had gone slack.

"Is Carmody here?" I asked, glancing up the stairs that led to John's room. "With John?"

"No. But he's coming. My father called, and said that Carmody was coming." She sat silently for a moment, slumped loose-limbed in her elegant white leather chair. Then, speaking with exaggerated precision, she said, "I was just thinking that, now, I always say 'my father.' I can't even remember when I said 'dad.'" Sadly, she shook her head. "I can remember when I used to say 'daddy.' But never when I said 'dad.'"

"I know. I remember those same things, Mrs. Kramer. We all do, I think."

With obvious difficulty she focused her confused eyes on my face. "You know, then," she said. "I remember, from the

other day. I can see that you know. I saw it then, too. On Saturday. You—"

John's voice came sharply down the stairs, but the words were indistinguishable, cut off by the sound of a slamming door. Apparently he'd only left his TV cartoon long enough to shout a quick command to his mother.

Signaling Canelli to do the same, I rose to my feet, as if to respond to whatever the boy had said. With Carmody on the way, I had to act fast. Speaking to the woman, I said, "We'll just be a few minutes, Mrs. Kramer. Would you like to come upstairs with us? To John's room?"

As I expected, she didn't answer immediately. Instead, predictably, she reached for the coffee cup. Jerking my head for Canelli to follow, I walked to the stairs, and began climbing. As we reached the upstairs hallway I spoke softly to Canelli. "We'll go inside his room. Both of us. I'll do the talking. You stay near the door. If she comes up, let her in. If anyone else comes—Durkin or Michael Carmody—keep them out. I don't care how you do it, as long as you're quiet about it. Clear?"

"Yessir, that's clear." With his face registering conscientious concentration, Canelli looked up and down the hallway, laboriously committing the layout to memory.

I listened at the boy's door for a moment, then knocked, then opened the door and went inside, gesturing for Canelli to close the door behind us.

"Hi, John. How are you today?"

He looked at me, frowned, then returned his gaze to the TV screen, where, surprisingly, Popeye and Olive Oyl were sliding together down a ship's anchor rope.

"John, I'm sorry, but—" I stepped in front of him, and switched off the TV. "I've got to talk to you. It'll just take a minute or two."

Instantly, his face clouded petulantly. To divert his attention, I gestured to Canelli, standing close beside the door. "This is Inspector Canelli, John. He's a detective, too."

Canelli raised an awkward hand in a sheepish-looking greeting.

"You said you'd show me your handcuffs," the boy said, returning his attention to me.

"I will. Before I leave, I promise I will. And Inspector Canelli will show you his gun, too. Do you know what a .357 Magnum is?"

"No." As he spoke, his eyes wandered to the blank TV screen. His face was still puckered petulantly. Plainly, it had been a long time since he'd been denied his pleasure.

"A .357 Magnum is the most powerful handgun—pistol—in the world." As I spoke, Canelli shuffled uncomfortably, smiled again, half-raised his hand again.

I'd gotten John's attention. He stared at Canelli with renewed interest as I said, "But first, I've got to know from you—"

At the door, Canelli stiffened. I saw the doorknob turn. Canelli gripped the knob, opened the door a few inches. Then he fully opened it to admit Marie Kramer.

"You sit on the bed, Mrs. Kramer," I ordered, gesturing for Canelli to see that she obeyed. Then I pointedly ignored her, turning back to the boy. With Carmody possibly due momentarily, I had no time to waste.

"What I'd like to do, John," I said, kneeling down in front of him, "is tell you what you did—what your father said you did—on Friday night. I know some of the story. I'll tell it, and you listen. I'll also talk about some things that happened a little while ago—several months ago. Whenever you can—whenever I make a mistake—you help me out. Okay?"

From behind me, I heard a sound: the mother, protesting. I saw John's eyes turn to her, then return to me. Hastily, I began talking.

"Your father left you and your mother when you were only three years old. So you probably didn't even remember him when he came to San Francisco last spring, and picked you up at your school. But then, as you talked with him, you remembered. He told you that someday soon, he'd come for

you, take you to live with him. And he did come for you, Friday night, three days ago. You were staying at your grandfather's house. You went to sleep in your room—the back bedroom, on the ground floor of your grandfather's house. Charlie Quade was in the room next to yours." I paused, then said, "Is that right so far?"

Slowly, somberly, he nodded. "That's right." He spoke gravely, cautiously. Without doubt, he sensed the gravity of the situation, sensed the danger.

To establish that, in fact, Quade was known to the boy, I asked, "Did you like Charlie Quade? Did you play with him?"

"No. He was too grouchy to play with. He was almost as bad as Bruce."

"But you spent considerable time together, you and Quade."

He nodded, then shrugged, then nodded again, indifferently. I went on.

"You went to sleep about ten o'clock Friday night. Then, two or three hours later, you woke up. Someone was in your room with you. It was your father. He warned you to be very quiet. He'd brought clothes with him, clothes for you. He got you dressed, and the two of you left your room. Quietly. Very, very quietly. The two of you went out into the hallway. You were headed for the door leading to the driveway. But then, suddenly, Mr. Quade came out into the hallway. Or maybe you weren't sure it was Mr. Quade, because it was dark, in the hallway. Then, before you knew what was happening, shots were fired. You couldn't be sure, but you heard—"

He was shaking his head. Saying: "No. Not then. We were outside, then."

"You were outside when you heard the shots?"

He nodded: a quick, decisive head bobbing. "Outside. Yes."

"Where, outside?"

"On the driveway."

"Are you sure, John? Are you sure your father didn't tell you to say that—?"

"We were on the driveway, almost to the sidewalk. We heard shots. Three."

"Three shots?"

Once more, he quickly nodded. "Three."

"Just a minute, John." Quickly, I crossed the room, asked Canelli for his big .357. I swung out the cylinder, ejected the cartridges, put the cartridges in my jacket pocket. As he watched, the boy's eyes grew wide, rapt. I clicked the cylinder back into place.

"This is a .357 Magnum, John. This gun will shoot through a car. All the way through a car. Here, you can take it. Don't worry, it's not loaded. But don't point it at anyone, even though it's unloaded. Remember what I said on Saturday: Whenever you have a gun in your hand, handle it like it was loaded."

"Gee—" Using both hands, he held the revolver at shaky arm's length, aimed at the TV screen. "Can I cock it and click it, like I did yours?"

"Go ahead." I watched him while he drew back the hammer, pulled the trigger. When the hammer fell, his whole body twitched, ecstatically. "Gee—*whiz*," he breathed. "That's some gun. It's heavier than yours. Bigger, and heavier."

"And more powerful, too."

"Can I do it again?"

"Go ahead." I watched him click the gun once more, then told him to lower the weapon. "Here—" I gestured to a nearby toy chest. "You sit here. You can hold the gun in your lap, for a while." As he obeyed, I knelt on the floor again, close to him. "That gun—Inspector Canelli's gun, and my gun, too—they're called 'revolvers.' They're called that because the cylinder revolves every time you fire it." I let a beat pass, watching his eyes glisten with excitement as he stared down at the big gun in his lap. Then, speaking quietly, fearful of

breaking the spell, I said, "Is that the kind of gun your father has? Like Canelli's gun, and my gun?"

For a moment I thought he hadn't heard me, so intently was he staring at the gun. I was about to ask the question again when he shook his head. "No. Not like this."

The tension in the room was palpable as I asked, "What's it like then, his gun?

"I don't think he has a gun."

"He had a gun last Friday night, John. We know he had a gun when he came to get you."

Plainly reluctant, he withdrew his avid gaze from the .357, raising his head. Frowning as his eyes met mine, he said, "My daddy didn't have a gun, then."

"Are you sure, John? Absolutely sure?"

He nodded once, then asked, "Can I pull the trigger again?"

"All right." I waited for him to cock the gun and aim it at a stuffed animal before I said, "Are you sure—absolutely sure—that your father didn't have a gun in his hand, last Friday?"

He nodded. "I'm sure."

"How many shots were there, again?"

He lowered the revolver to his lap and held up three fingers of his left hand. It was a classically innocent, emphatic childhood gesture. "Three. One shot, then two more." He gripped the revolver again with both hands. "Can I—"

Suddenly the bedroom door opened. I recognized Michael Carmody, Guest's smooth-talking, urbanely dressed assistant. Bruce Durkin stood close behind the lawyer, looking over Carmody's shoulder. Both men were frowning as they advanced into the room. Instantly, Canelli stepped in front of them. As if he were directing traffic, Canelli raised both arms.

"You can't do this." Carmody stepped sharply forward, as if to dodge Canelli's restraining arm. Instinctively, I took Canelli's revolver from John, thrusting the empty weapon in my belt.

"You're intimidating this boy," Carmody blustered.

"We'll lodge a complaint with the D.A. I can promise you that."

"I'm acting on the D.A.'s request, Mr. Carmody. Mr. Stringfellow's request. You can talk to him."

"Nevertheless, I—"

Marie Kramer was rising unsteadily to her feet, bracing herself with one hand on the headboard of John's bed. "It's all right," she said. "They're not—"

The lawyer turned on her, stepping so close that his face was within inches of hers. "Your father won't like this, Mrs. Kramer." He spoke in a low, angry whisper. "He won't like it at all."

"John's all right," she mumbled, her voice a self-defensive mumble. "He's all right. He and the lieutenant were just talking. That's all. Just talking."

Furiously, Carmody turned away to confront Canelli, who still stood with his arms raised. "Will you put your arms down, you big ape?"

"Ape?" Canelli's expression first registered a kind of mild puzzlement, followed by soft-eyed reproach. Carmody had hurt Canelli's feelings. "Ape?"

"Never mind, Canelli." I stepped forward, touching one of his arms, still upraised. "It's all right. We can go." Then, for the record, I said, "You heard everything John Kramer said, didn't you? Every word?"

"Yessir," Canelli answered. "I heard every word."

FOURTEEN

"BEFORE YOU TELL ME WHAT YOU'VE GOT TO TELL ME," FRIEDman said, "listen to what *I've* got to tell *you*."

I put my quarter in the coffee machine, waited for my cup to fill, then followed Friedman down the hall to his office. Obviously feeling smugly self-satisfied, Friedman sat behind his desk, loosened his collar, raised a pudgy forefinger, and said, "First, Washington finally came through on the ownership of the gun. It took them a while, but they came through."

"Well?" I asked, sipping my coffee, "are you going to tell me?"

"The gun is registered to Gordon Kramer."

"Jesus. Really?"

"He bought it in New York, six years ago. And it's never been reported stolen, or sold."

"So we've got the gun tied to him, and Ballistics has the fatal bullet tied to the gun," I mused. As I spoke, I was thinking of John Kramer. Had he lied to me? So convincingly? So casually, keeping his attention so guilelessly fixed on Canelli's service revolver? It seemed impossible.

"I also discovered," Friedman said, raising a second finger, "that, yes, Kramer was tied up with organized crime, in

New York. I talked to a friend of mine, there. He knew all about Kramer."

"Was he ever arrested?"

Friedman shook his head. "No. He never even came close. He was a front man, all the way. He was very smart, apparently. Very good at what he did. Which was laundering money. But for every ten dollars he laundered for the mob, he apparently kept one dollar for himself. And he made his dollars grow. Legitimately, more or less."

"Has he been clean since he moved back to New York?"

"As far as Fred—my friend—knows, he *has* been. At least, he hasn't come to anyone's attention that Fred knows about. He's still checking, though."

"Is there anything else?"

"Well—" Apologetically, Friedman shrugged. "Not a whole lot else. Except that Bruce Durkin, Mrs. Kramer's live-in bodyguard, or whatever, has a record in Los Angeles for felonious assault."

"He told me he'd been arrested. I wonder where Guest found him."

Instead of replying, Friedman glanced at his watch. "After I heard that the gun was registered to Kramer, I arranged to have him brought down for interrogation. He should be ready just about now. Do you want to join the party?"

"Fine. But, first, you'd better know what I found out from John Kramer."

"Please—" He waved a hand in a gesture of broad invitation, then settled back to listen.

When I finished describing the interrogation, Friedman sat silently, obviously lost in thought as he stared vaguely out the window. Finally he blinked, and focused on me.

"This kid is six years old," he mused. "Kids that old can be pretty sharp, pretty observant. *Is* he pretty sharp?"

"He's sharp enough," I said. "The question is, could he be sharp enough to repeat exactly the story Kramer told him to tell—and sharp enough to make it seem convincing."

"You talked to him. What's your best guess?"

"My best guess," I said slowly, "is that he's telling the truth. I don't think he's been rehearsed." I was aware of the reluctance I felt, saying it. If I believed John—if his story stood up—then my job had suddenly become a lot more complicated.

"Christ," Friedman grated, obviously also stung by the same thought. "Where's that leave us?"

"There's still the gun," I said. "Kramer's got to explain the gun."

Friedman heaved himself to his feet. "True. There's still the gun. Let's see what he says about it."

"I bought it years ago," Kramer said. "I bought it when I lived in New York, just after we were married. When we moved to San Francisco, I brought it with me. When I went back I left it with my wife. With Marie."

In the small interrogation room, a sudden silence settled.

Marie Kramer . . .

She'd been out Friday night. She'd probably been hitting the singles' bars.

Had she learned Kramer was in town, trying to steal her child? With the gun in her purse, could she have followed him to the Guest mansion? Could she have watched Kramer enter through the garage? Could she then have followed him into the house? She'd doubtless been drunk. She could have become confused in the darkness, mistaking Quade for Kramer. I closed my eyes, visualizing the scene of the crime. Yes, given the layout, it would have been possible for Kramer to have entered through the garage, gotten John out of bed, dressed him and taken him out through the doorway to the driveway while Marie was still in the garage, or perhaps in the house's rear hallway, out of Kramer's sight. Kramer and John could have been outside on the driveway when Quade emerged from his room. Shots could have been exchanged.

Shots . . .

Four shots? Three shots?

Sitting at the interrogation table, dressed in an orange jump suit, Kramer was staring hard into my eyes, as if to divine my thoughts through sheer force of will. I saw him lick at his lips, then slowly shake his head.

"Marie couldn't have done it," he said finally. "She's no killer. No murderer."

"She could've done it accidentally," I said. "She could've been drunk. Confused. She knew you wanted to steal John. You say you staked out her house, Friday. She could've followed you—when you were following Guest and John. She could've guessed what you intended to do. She could've gone home, gotten the gun, returned to Guest's house. She could've followed you inside Guest's house. You and John left by the side door. She could've gone in through the garage, the same way you went in. She could've—"

"No. It—it's not in Marie, to kill someone. Don't you understand that? She—she's self-destructive, God knows. But she wouldn't—"

"I'm not saying she did it on purpose, any more than we said you did it on purpose, by premeditation. She saw someone. It was dark. Quade could've fired first. She could have—"

"Marie can't shoot a gun. I tried to teach her, once. She's terrified of guns."

"She could also be terrified of losing her son."

Slowly, ruefully, he shook his head. For a moment he sat dejected, shoulders slumped, looking down at the table in front of him. Two and a half days in jail had changed him. His eyes were puffy. His mouth sometimes moved at random, betraying an uncertainty, a confusion—a fearfulness. His hands on the table were half clenched, as if the strength had gone out of them. He was clean-shaven, but his expensively barbered brown hair was only finger combed.

"I don't know whether she's terrified of losing John," he finally said. "I don't think she knows. She's terrified of life, that's all. Terrified of living."

Friedman leaned forward, looking closely into the other man's face. As always, Friedman's expression was unreadable. But he seemed to be trying to see deeply into Kramer's innermost thoughts. Suddenly it occurred to me that both Kramer and Friedman were Jews. Then it occurred to me that, in the line of duty, we didn't encounter many Jews.

"You've told us about your problems with Alexander Guest," Friedman said. "Tell us how you feel about your ex wife. Tell us how she feels about you."

Slowly, Kramer raised his head. Behind his designer rimless glasses, his dark eyes were hollow, haggard. I tried to imagine him dressed as we'd first seen him, in his beautifully tailored sports jacket and slacks, his hundred-dollar shirt. Would he still look the same, act the same? Or had his days in jail changed him, permanently? I'd seen it happen before, many times. When the cell door closes, and the key turns in the lock, the soul begins to shrivel.

"I never hated Marie," he said. "Never. And I don't think she ever hated me. She was too—too exhausted to hate me, too emotionally drained. She was like that when I married her. She'd just gotten out of a bad marriage. Her husband married her for her money. And he got it, too—got a lot of it. She was almost thirty years old, when I met her. She'd been married for five years, and the guy had really done a number on her. God knows, her father had started the job. But her husband—Beresford—finished it, no question. All her life, people have been mistreating Marie. Her mother, her father. Her husband. Everyone."

"You, too?" Friedman asked.

Kramer drew a deep, ragged breath. He sat motionless for a moment, staring down at his helpless-looking hands. Finally he said, "Yeah, me, too. Definitely, me, too."

"Had she started to drink, when you met her?" I asked.

He nodded. "Yes. Not as much as she drinks now. But she was drinking, no question."

"Did you have some good years?" Friedman asked quietly. "When you first got married?"

Slowly, head still bowed, with infinite reluctance, he said, "No, we didn't have any good years. She was pregnant when we got married. It was a bad pregnancy—she spent a lot of time in bed. And then after John was born, when the postpartum psychosis started, she really started to come apart, really started to drink. And she's never stopped. Not really. It's been six years, and she hasn't stopped."

"Why'd you get married?" Friedman asked. "It doesn't sound like a love match. And she could've had an abortion, after all."

"I suppose," he answered, "that I married her for her money. For her father's connections." He spoke in a low, resigned voice.

"We have information," Friedman said, "that indicates you had ties with organized crime, in New York. Is that true?"

With an obvious effort, he raised his eyes, looking directly at Friedman. A long moment of silence followed. Kramer was visibly collecting himself, calculating how to answer. This was an accusation he understood, an accusation he'd faced before. He was obviously on familiar ground as he said, "My lawyer and my wife are busy talking to private investigators. I agreed to talk to you without them—without my lawyer. That's because I'm innocent. I was outside the house, on the driveway, when those shots were fired. I'm willing to talk about that. With or without my lawyer, I'm willing to talk about that. But this—" He gestured firmly, denying Friedman. "This is something else. It's got nothing to do with the Quade murder. Nothing."

Friedman let a beat pass. Then, inscrutably, he nodded. "I retract the question," he said quietly.

I blinked. I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen Friedman concede a point—to a suspect, or to anyone else. He held Kramer's gaze for a moment, then looked at me. It was my cue.

"I talked to your ex-wife today. And to John, too."

Kramer turned in his chair to face me. I saw him draw a deep breath, as if to face the inevitable.

"And?" His eyes were steady, meeting mine.

I shrugged. "John corroborates your story. I wasn't surprised."

"Does that mean you don't believe him?"

"What I believe doesn't matter, Kramer. I just investigate. You know that."

"You investigate, and you tell the D.A. what you think."

I nodded. "Right."

"And what're you thinking, Lieutenant Hastings?"

"I'm thinking that I'm going back to Telegraph Hill, as soon as we finish here. Your son corroborates your account of your movements, Friday night. That's a plus, no question—a point in your favor." I let a beat pass, then said, "Let's see what your ex-wife says about the gun. Let's see whether her story squares with yours."

FIFTEEN

MARIE KRAMER FROWNED, THEN NODDED LOOSELY. "I REMEMber now. He used to keep the gun in his bureau—in the sweater drawer. I found it there, once. That was when we were still married." She sat silently for a moment, watching me with vacant eyes. Then her face twisted into a slack, rueful smile. "I wonder what I was doing, in his bureau? Maybe I was looking for evidence."

"Evidence?" I exchanged a quick glance with Canelli, who looked like someone who'd just delivered the groceries, and was waiting to be paid while he sat ill at ease on the edge of a stylish, uncomfortable white leather chair. "What evidence?"

"You know—" Her expression turned alcoholically owlish. She picked up her cut cystal highball glass, half filled, dark amber. She lifted the glass in a mocking little toast, cocked her head aside to parody a demure drawing room apology for drinking without me, then noisily gulped down half the drink. After five o'clock, apparently, she switched from her coffee cup to a highball glass. "You know," she repeated, "evidence. Lipstick on the collar. Maybe a rubber or two." Now she held the glass with both hands in front of her face, looking at me over its rim. Her eyes turned playfully, blearily

coquettish. "I wish you'd have a drink with me, Lieutenant. In the line of duty, of course."

"Where's the gun now?" I asked. "Do you know?" Despite the fact that the question was of crucial importance, I tried to make it sound casual, offhand. So far, the media hadn't discovered that the gun had been found at the murder scene. So if Marie Kramer knew it had been found, and tried to account for its presence in the shrubbery bordering her father's driveway, then she would be admitting to guilty knowledge. Only her father could have told her about the gun. And that connection would be easy to check.

She shrugged. "The last time I saw it, I think it was in the closet, on the top shelf. I remember that I told Gordon to put it somewhere high, so John couldn't get it. That was before he left." She fell silent again, brooding now as she stared down into her drink, still holding the glass with both hands. Finally, speaking in a barely audible voice, she said, "The gun was a kind of a last gesture, I guess. He wasn't going to be around to protect me, so he left me the goddam gun. I recognized it, at the time. As a gesture, I mean." She nodded over her highball. "The gun, and John—and a closetful of clothes that had gone out of style, that's all he left me with." She smirked wearily. "Me and the clothes, both of us out of style. I used to think about that, whenever I opened his closet, after he'd gone. But, still, I kept them around, his clothes. Long after he'd gone, I kept them around. I remember once I brought a bartender home, and gave him one of Gordon's sports jackets. But it was a mistake. I thought it'd make me feel better, giving a total stranger his sports jacket. But it didn't."

"It sounds like you missed him," Canelli ventured. "It sounds like you hated to see him go."

Slowly, she turned in her chair to focus on Canelli. Finally she muttered, "He was always good to me. That's the hell of it, you see. He was good to me, and he was good to John. Gordon wasn't like he seemed. He always acted—you know—like a hustler. All people saw was his fifty dollar ties and his five hundred dollar suits. But, really, he was just like

the rest of us, trying to find someone to love, somewhere. He—" Suddenly she rose to her feet, glass in hand, and walked across the living room to the view window, weaving as she went. At 6:30, the twilight shadows were lengthening on Telegraph Hill, softening the wind-twisted trees and the shrubs and the dramatic outcroppings of raw rock. To the west, the sky was orange and violet as the sun began sinking closer to a cloud bank far offshore.

In the silence, from the upper floor, I heard the sound of John's TV. I'd expected, when he met us at the front door and let us in, Bruce Durkin would have warned us not to interrogate John. He hadn't. He'd simply glowered at us, and said he'd tell Mrs. Kramer we were there. When I told Durkin I wanted to talk to him before we left, he didn't reply. He simply looked at me with flat, hostile eyes. Bruce Durkin didn't like cops.

I got to my feet, gestured for Canelli to remain seated, and walked to the window. I didn't look at Marie Kramer, I simply stood beside her, looking out toward the orange arc of the Golden Gate Bridge, spectacular against the purple sunset. Some trick of the fading light had touched the bridge with a gentle phosphorescent glow.

"It's my own picture postcard," she said softly. "Thank God. Sometimes I think it's all I've got in the world, this view."

'That's not true," I answered. "You've got John."

"I'm afraid," she said, "that John doesn't like me very much. John, or anyone else. I can't think of anyone who likes me very much. Even you. You're a kind man. I can see that, when you look at me. You see things. But you don't like me, either."

"Mrs. Kramer—" I hesitated, trying to find the words. "I'm doing a job. I'm a policeman, doing a job. And I—"

"Gordon didn't kill that man," she said. "You know he didn't kill him."

"Someone killed him. And I've got to find out who. That's why I'm here. I've got to find out who."

"You came here to ask about Gordon's gun. Is that the gun that—?" She let it go unfinished.

"When was the last time you saw that gun, Mrs. Kramer? When was the last time you handled it?"

"I've already told you. I saw it on the top shelf of Gordon's closet. Way in the back."

"When was that?"

"Three years ago. When Gordon left."

"That's the last time you saw it."

She nodded. "Yes."

"You were starting to ask whether Gordon's gun—your gun—was the one that killed Charlie Quade. If I were to tell you that, yes, that's the gun, what would you say?" As I asked the question, I turned toward her, carefully watching her face.

"Well—" She moved her glass in a bemused arc. "Well, I'd say that someone took the gun. Stole it."

"Have you ever had a robbery since your husband left?"

Slowly, reluctantly, she shook her head. "No." Her voice was very low, her eyes very still, watching me. Was it fear I saw, crouched in the shadows of those dark, still eyes? Fear for whom? Herself? Or someone else?

"Besides you, Mrs. Kramer, who knows you have that gun? Think, now. Think very carefully."

"Well, there's—" She broke off, gulped down the last of her drink. Before she dropped it, I took the glass from her listless fingers. "There's Gordon, of course. And my—my father, he knew, I think. And then—then—" She began to shake her head, as if to deny her unspoken thought.

"Who?" I prompted. "Who else?"

"There's John," she said. "He knows, too."

The words produced a shock, a sudden emptiness at the pit of my stomach.

Was she suggesting that John could have done it?

Could he have taken the gun with him, tucked in his belt, or hidden among his toys, in his overnight bag? Could he have killed Quade? It had happened before. Anyone who can aim a gun and pull the trigger can commit murder.

Or, more like it, Kramer could have told John to bring the gun to Guest's house. Was that a possibility?

No. If Kramer had wanted a gun, he could have brought one from New York.

Suddenly I realized that I was in over my head. Way over my head. I needed help. Friedman's help.

But there was one more question I had to ask. "Mrs. Kramer, if the two of us went to that closet, right now, do you think we'd find that pistol?"

"No," she whispered. "No, I don't think we'd find it."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because the murder was committed with that gun."

"Why would you say that? I didn't make that statement. I said '*if* that was the gun. I didn't say it *was* the gun."

"You didn't have to say it. I can see it in your eyes."

"Who killed him, Mrs. Kramer?"

"I don't know."

"I think you do. Or, at least, I think you have a very good idea."

Suddenly, vehemently, she shook her head. A brief, desperate defiance flared in her eyes. "No. I don't. I *don't know.*"

"Where were you Friday night between the hours of eleven P.M. and one A.M.?"

"I was—" The brief fire died; her eyes went dark again, fell away again. "I was drinking."

"Where?"

"In a bar, somewhere."

"Which bar? Where?"

"I—I can't remember. A lot of different bars. With a lot of different people."

"Were you driving your car?"

"No. I took cabs. I always take cabs." She looked at me with a kind of wan defiance, then said, "My driver's license was revoked last year."

"Do you remember what time you got home?"

"I think it was about 1:30. Something like that."

I was about to ask her for names, or faces. I was about to ask her whether she'd taken anyone home, Friday night: a nameless, faceless man who could be her alibi. But then I realized that, once again, I was on treacherous ground. According to law, once the suspicion of guilt enters an officer's mind he must warn the suspect of his or her constitutional rights. And I wasn't willing to make Alexander Guest's daughter a murder suspect. Not on my own authority.

"You think I murdered that man," she mumbled. "Don't you?"

"Mrs. Kramer, that's not for me to—"

"You do, goddammit. Why don't you say it? Are you afraid? Are you afraid of my father? Afraid he'll—what's the expression—get you put back to pounding a beat?"

I handed the highball glass back to her and stepped away. "I'm not afraid of your father, Mrs. Kramer. But I'm not stupid, either. It's a serious matter, accusing someone of murder. A *very* serious matter, as you well know. Without more proof than I have now, I'm not making any such accusation against you. However, I'll tell you this—" I broke off, trying to weigh the consequences of what I was about to say: "I'll tell you that, yes, Kramer's gun—your gun—killed Quade. As I understand it, both you and Kramer agree that the gun was kept here, in this house. And it's obvious that, at some point, someone took that gun out of this house, and took it to your father's house, where it was used to commit murder." I let a beat pass, searching for some reaction. I saw nothing. Her face was expressionless as she stared out of the window at her expensive view.

"So really," I said quietly, "it all comes down to a pretty simple question: Who took that gun out of this house, and when did he—or she—do it? That's what we've got to determine first. Then we've got to find out who pulled the trigger."

Still, she made no response. Her face was frozen in a mask of hopeless misery. Her eyes were empty, her mouth was slack, twitching slightly at one corner. Her head hung slightly

forward, as if she could no longer support its weight. She was breathing unevenly, in short, shallow gasps.

"I'm going to leave now, Mrs. Kramer," I said softly. "I'm going to interrogate Durkin, downstairs. Then I'm going to talk to the D.A., and to my superiors. Meanwhile, if there's anything you want to tell me—" I showed her my card, then put it on the window sill. I hesitated, then said, "Say good-bye to John for me. Tell him I'm sorry I didn't have time to show him my handcuffs. Tell him I haven't forgotten. He's a good kid."

As I turned away, I heard her mumble, "Too good to have a drunk for a mother. Is that what you—" Suddenly I heard her sob. It was a harsh, ugly sound, torn from the tortured depths of her soul. I didn't turn, didn't acknowledge her torment.

SIXTEEN

AS I KNOCKED ON DURKIN'S DOOR, I SPOKE SOFTLY TO CANELLI. "What'd you think? Before we got here—before I told her Kramer's gun was the murder weapon—did she know the gun wasn't in the closet?"

Promptly, Canelli nodded. "That's what I think, Lieutenant. Definitely, she knew it wasn't in the closet. Because if she'd thought it *was* in the closet, that's the first thing she'd've said. Sure as God made little green apples, she knew that—"

The door opened to reveal Bruce Durkin. He was barefooted, wearing a blue terrycloth robe with "Bruce" stitched in white on the left breast. The robe came to mid thigh, revealing thick, muscular calves.

"I was just going to take a shower," he said.

"We won't be long." I stepped forward. "We just want to check on a couple of things."

He backed away grudgingly, into a short, narrow hallway. The cramped quarters emphasized Durkin's wide, weight lifter's shoulders, his short, stocky neck, and his powerful torso that tapered to a trim waist. For a moment the three of us stood crowded shoulder to shoulder. Finally, still grudgingly, Durkin turned and led the way to a small living room that looked out to the east, across the city. The room was

furnished with cheap plastic furniture that made the apartment look like a third-rate motel room.

"I was going to go out." He sat on a sofa, crossed his heavy, hairy legs and pulled the short bathrobe across his thighs. It was an incongruous moment: this big, brawny man plucking at his robe like a painfully modest girl struggling with a short skirt.

Canelli and I took two matching metal straight-back chairs, facing Durkin. "We just found out that you did time for aggravated assault down in L.A." As I said it, I experienced a sense of relief, a feeling that I was on familiar ground. Unlike Marie Kramer and Alexander Guest, Bruce Durkin was a known quantity to me.

Sullenly, he shrugged. "It was a barroom fight. I told you about it, Saturday. The other guy picked up a bottle. I picked up a chair."

"How much time did you serve?"

"Six months in Chino."

"What was your sentence?"

"Twenty-four months. It was a first offense."

"Are you still on probation?"

He shook his head. "No. Probation expired almost a year ago."

"Where'd you do your probation?"

"Los Angeles. I came up here as soon as I'd served my time."

"Do you have friends here?"

"Yeah."

"How'd you get this job?"

"A friend of mine—Eddie Johnson—is a process server. He does a lot of work for Mr. Guest. I went to work for Eddie, serving summonses. So—" He shrugged. "So when Mr. Guest needed a bodyguard, he asked Eddie if he knew of anyone."

"You didn't tell Mr. Guest that you served time."

"No."

"Why not?"

"It never came up. He didn't ask, so I didn't say anything. It's like—you know—in the army. Don't volunteer."

"So Alexander Guest moved an ex con into his daughter's house, to guard his only grandchild." As I said it, Canelli guffawed.

"Nobody's perfect, I guess," Canelli observed.

Durkin glanced at Canelli with flat, hostile eyes, then looked away indifferently.

"What're you to Marie Kramer, Durkin?" I asked. "I know you're John's bodyguard, and a driver, and I guess you do some household chores. But what else do you do?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"You know what I mean, Durkin. She's an unhappy woman. She drinks too much, and she spends her weekends at the singles' bars, looking for men. What's she doing during the week? What'd you do for her, during the week?"

"What's she say I do for her?"

"I'm asking you."

He shrugged his bully-boy shoulders as he looked at me with shrewd, street-wise eyes. Finally he said, "I'm not going to answer that. It's private, what you're asking. Private business."

I nodded, then decided to match his carefully calculated indifference. I'd let him wonder what I knew about his relations with Marie.

"Mrs. Kramer has a gun in her bedroom," I said, "a .38 Smith and Wesson revolver. You know that."

"I—" His eyes fell away. I had him guessing. How much did I know? How much had she told me?

"Come on, Durkin—" I tried to make it sound casual, as if it was a routine question: groundwork, nothing more, confirming information I already possessed. "Just answer the question. Did you know about the gun?"

"A 'yes' or a 'no' will do," Canelli said. "Just a 'yes' or a 'no.'"

I kept myself from reacting. I'd wanted to slip the

question in casually. It was one reason I'd asked him whether he was sleeping with Marie Kramer. I wanted to mask the more important question with a less important one. By picking up the question, emphasizing it, Canelli wasn't helping.

Showing an indifference he obviously didn't feel, Durkin shrugged again. "Yeah, I knew about the gun."

Still trying for a seemingly casual indifference, I asked, "Did you ever handle the gun?"

He nodded. "Yeah. Once. She was afraid of it. She wanted me to check the gun, see if it was loaded."

As I nodded in return, I exchanged a covert look with Canelli. Half an hour ago, Marie Kramer had said that only her father and her child and Gordon knew she had the gun.

To protect Durkin, Marie Kramer had lied. She'd known the stakes. She'd known—or suspected—that her gun was the murder weapon. But then she'd lied.

"Did she ask you to unload it, or what?" Canelli asked.

"Yeah."

"And did you unload it?" I asked

He nodded. "Yeah. I put the shells in one of the drawers, inside the closet. I put them in a sock."

"So your prints would be on the gun," Canelli said.

Remembering that the gun had been wiped clean of fingerprints, I said, "They'd be on the cartridges, too." I let a beat pass, then added, "A lot of people forget about cartridges."

"Listen—" Frowning uneasily, he leaned forward on the plastic sofa. The robe fell open across his thighs, unheeded. With relief, I saw that he was wearing undershorts. "Listen, what's this all about, anyhow? What's this about her gun, anyhow?"

"What it's about," I said softly, "is that her gun was used to kill Charlie Quade."

As if he suspected a trick, Durkin looked from me to Canelli, then back to me. I saw his Adam's apple bob in his throat. His big hands, one on either knee, were clenched knuckle-white.

I decided to gamble, and tell him the rest of it: "There's no question. That's the gun, the murder weapon. It was ditched not far from the crime scene. It'd been wiped clean of fingerprints." I let a long, deliberate beat pass as I saw his heavy, stolid face begin to come apart, spasmodically breaking up into tics and twitches. Durkin was softening up—fast. "But there're fingerprints on the cartridges," I said. "Latents. There'll be your prints, since you already unloaded the gun. Then there'll be other prints, too—the murderer's prints, on top of yours."

"Ah—ah—" His mouth was working impotently, trying to form words that wouldn't come.

"Or maybe there's just your prints," Canelli said softly. "Just yours, nobody else's. From when you maybe took the cartridges out of the sock and reloaded the gun. Friday."

Suddenly Durkin got to his feet. Caught by surprise, I rose with him, instinctively falling into a crouch, fists clenched. Canelli was on his feet, too, instantly on guard, reaching under his jacket for his service revolver.

But Durkin wasn't going to fight. He was going to yell.

"Get outta here, you bastards. Get *out*. If you—you don't get out, I'll call Mr. Guest. He told me to call him, if—if –" Mouth twisting, head turning from one of us to the other like a confused bull ready to charge, Durkin took a furious step forward, threatening us with clenched fists.

I raised both hands, to placate him. In close quarters, if he came for us, I doubted whether Canelli and I could subdue him without getting badly hurt.

"Okay," I said. "Cool down. We're going. But remember—" I backed one cautious step away, then another step. "Just remember, all we want is the truth. If we get it, and if you're clean, you've got nothing to worry about."

I gestured for Canelli to open the door, then gratefully walked out into the central hallway that served both Marie Kramer's part of the house and Durkin's tiny apartment. At the top of the stairs, I saw John Kramer. Eyes round, the boy said, "Did he hit you? Did you hit him? *Did* you?"

Safe now, I could smile. "Cops don't hit people if they can help it, John. It's not smart."

"That's because they hit back," Canelli said, opening the front door and stepping outside.

SEVENTEEN

"SOMEONE INSIDE, THERE—" CANELLI JERKED HIS HEAD BACK toward Marie Kramer's townhouse— "sure knows more than they're telling."

"I'm glad I took you along. I wouldn't want to deal with Durkin alone."

"Jeez, yeah," Canelli said fervently. "I know what you mean. That guy's got muscles on his muscles."

Our cruiser was parked down the hill from the Kramer house, and out of sight around the street's first downhill curve. We walked to the car and got inside. I told Canelli to turn on the ignition, but not to start the engine. Then I switched on the radio and contacted Communications. I identified myself and ordered a round-the-clock, two-man stakeout on the Kramer house, located at 845 Telegraph Place.

"I want us to keep them under surveillance until the stakeout comes." I pointed to the curve ahead. "I'll walk up there, where I can see the house and you can see me. If our relief hasn't come in a half hour, you relieve me."

"Yessir."

"Keep your eye on me."

"Yessir. Right."

I got out of the car and walked up Telegraph Place. The

narrow, winding street clung to the side of the hill, spiraling up to Coit Tower, at the top. As always, a steady two-way stream of tourist cars was clogging Telegraph Place. Bound for the sightseer's circle at the crest of the hill, the uphill stream inched forward, moving in a constant, closed-circuit, bumper-to-bumper parade. Finished with sightseeing, the downhill stream moved faster. The September evening was warm and soft; the sky was a clear, darkening blue overhead. Across the bay, the lights of Oakland and Berkeley were beginning to sparkle in the hills that rimmed the East Bay.

Because the evening was clear and warm, the procession of cars climbing the hill was more congested than normal, moving more slowly. Most of the sightseers would park at the observation area that circled Coit Tower. They would get out of their cars, look dutifully at the view, snap a few pictures, get back in their cars and join the descending procession. Later, after dark, teenagers would begin arriving on the scene, hoping to find a parking place and cop a quick feel before the police on the beat hassled them.

I found a spot on the sidewalk beside a cypress tree where I could see both the Kramer house and our cruiser. Because it was built against the side of the hill, the unique design of the house made surveillance simple. Whether he went on foot or by automobile, whoever left the house had to leave by the front door. Except for two front windows, also in plain view, there was no other way out of the house.

I leaned against a low stone wall and tried to look inconspicuous, concealed behind the cypress. Always, it seemed, detective work came down to this: standing, or sitting, or even lying in some unlikely place, watching and waiting—for hours, days, even weeks. Sometimes we knew what we were looking for, most of the time we didn't. An anxious over-the-shoulder glance, an uneasy gait, a few furtive words exchanged in a shadowed doorway—often these were the detective's most meaningful data, his only guide to possible guilt or innocence. So, inevitably, it came down to a gambler's choice. Or, rather, a series of gambler's choices, at

least half of them wrong. A single detective on stakeout could—

The front door of the Kramer house was slowly opening. Bruce Durkin came out. He stood motionless for a moment, looking up and down the street. Then, carefully—cautiously—he closed the black lacquered door. He was dressed in jeans, jogging shoes, a beige colored waist length jacket. He carried a small duffel bag in his left hand.

Covertly, I gestured to Canelli, signaling for him to join me. I held my hand to my mouth and ear, reminding him to bring our walkie-talkie. I saw his answering nod, then turned back to face the townhouse. Durkin was descending the three steps to the flagstone walk. Now he turned right, toward the garage door. Because of the steepness of the hillside terrain, the house had only a single car garage. So Durkin was taking Marie's car.

Why?

Was he running?

His furtive manner, the duffel bag, the fact that he obviously intended to take Marie Kramer's car—everything suggested that, yes, Durkin was running.

If I was right—if he was running—then I was within moments of making a gambler's choice.

He could back the car out of the small garage, wait for a break in the sightseeing traffic, then join the downhill stream of cars. Minutes later, he would be in downtown traffic, close to his choice of freeway ramps. And the freeways weren't closely patrolled. Once on the freeways, his chances were odds-on of escaping into the gathering twilight.

I had two choices: Either block his car with mine, or get his car and its license number on the air. The second choice was the simplest, the one favored by regulations. If nothing went wrong, with plenty of manpower, units responding to my pick-up order could easily take him into custody without unacceptable risk.

If nothing went wrong.

If the units in the area weren't already responding to emergency calls.

If the units responding could catch him before he got to the freeways.

I glanced back at Canelli. He was already out of our cruiser, walking toward me, trotting now. Had I time to run back to the car, start the engine, drive into position to block Durkin before he got clear of the garage? Looking toward the house, I saw the garage door lifting, automatically. Durkin was already inside the garage, out of sight.

Events were getting ahead of me. There might not be enough time to get into my car and work my way through the uphill stream of sightseeing cars before Durkin backed Marie Kramer's car out of her garage and got underway, escaping downhill.

Time was working against me now. Time had tilted in Durkin's favor.

My only hope of blocking the suspect was the stream of tourist cars itself.

The house was about five hundred feet ahead, up the hill. I began running, dodging between slow-moving cars, crossing the street to the opposite sidewalk, on the same side of the street as the Kramer house. From inside the garage, a silvery shape emerged: the trunk of a Mercedes convertible. The car was across the sidewalk now; Durkin was waiting for a break in the traffic. Certainly he would back into the street, then turn downhill, toward me. If he drove uphill, into the closed circuit of sightseeing cars, he would trap himself.

With two hundred feet still separating me from the Mercedes, I slowed to a walk, unwilling to risk attracting Durkin's attention. Ahead, three pedestrians were on the sidewalk, hopefully screening me. Now the automatic garage door was lowering, barely clearing the Mercedes' hood. Slowly, the big car was backing into the street, forcing its way into traffic. One horn blared, and another. Now the downhill flow of cars had stopped, waiting for the Mercedes. But

Durkin must also back into the uphill flow, before he had room enough to turn the Mercedes downhill.

Three cars separated me from the Mercedes. In the seconds it took me to make a decision, one car passed me; only two remained. The first was a black pickup truck, the second was a red Porsche. I took my shield case from my pocket, flipped it open to show my gold lieutenant's badge, and stepped out into the street, both arms raised. Inside the black pickup, I saw a man driving, with a woman beside him. I heard the man's angry shout, saw the woman's mouth come open. The car's horn blared; its front end dipped sharply as the brakes caught. I stood motionless until the truck had completely stopped, only a foot from my legs. Close behind me, I heard Canelli's voice.

"Is it Durkin?"

"Yes. Stand here, in front of the truck." I stepped to the driver's open window. The driver was young and swarthy, a Chicano.

"Hey, man, whadda you doing, man? I couldda—"

"Switch off your engine." I put my hand through the window. "Give me the keys. *Now.*" As I spoke, I looked up the hill, beyond the red Porsche. The driver's door of the Mercedes was swinging open.

"Hey, man, whadda you talking, give you the keys? I've no done nothing. You got no right to—"

"Either give me the keys, or you're going to jail. Take your choice."

"Christ, Rémo, give him the goddam keys," the woman wailed. "He's a *cop*. Can't you *see*?"

A brown hand took the keys from the ignition, handed them to me.

"Now stay there. Stay in the car. Roll up the windows, and lock the door." Ignoring the driver's protests, I pocketed the keys and my shield, then gestured for Canelli to join me as I walked between the pickup and the Porsche to the sidewalk. Less than a hundred feet separated us from the Mercedes, still standing with its driver's door open on the downhill side,

toward us. The car was completely blocking the sidewalk. Inside the car, I saw movement. Durkin was sliding across the front seat toward the passenger's door, on the car's uphill side.

"Has he seen us?" Canelli asked.

"I don't know. You take this side. I'll take the passenger side."

"Right."

Walking shoulder to shoulder, in unison, we unbuttoned our jackets, loosened our revolvers in their holsters.

Did Durkin have a gun? A knife? Would he—?

"Hey," Canelli exclaimed sharply. "*Hey.*"

On the far side of the car, the passenger door suddenly swung open. Durkin was out of the car. He was running up the sidewalk, away from us.

Dodging a casually strolling man and a young woman wheeling a baby in a stroller, I drew my revolver. I began running, shouting, "Police. Hold it there, Durkin. *Hold* it."

Head down, arms pumping, legs driving like pistons, Durkin ignored the command. Beside me, running, Canelli was already panting. "God*dam*," he gasped, "he can *run*."

"Use your walkie-talkie," I panted. "Make a call. Then catch up."

At the Mercedes, Canelli broke stride, stopped, switched on the radio. Ahead, Durkin suddenly dodged to his left—and disappeared. At the same moment, I heard a child's voice, close beside me.

"*Hey.* What'd he do? What Bruce *do*?"

Looking down, I saw John Kramer running beside me.

"Go back," I gasped, returning my gaze to the spot where Durkin had disappeared. And now I saw two brick pillars that marked the beginning of concrete stairs leading up the hill. Seeing them, I remembered: Parts of Telegraph Hill were protected from real estate development with trees and underbrush as thick as a forest.

"Are you going to *shoot* him? *Are* you?"

I decided to save my breath, not answer.

"*Are you?*" John demanded loudly. He was ahead of me

now, running easily. Behind me, Canelli was shouting that he was coming. I was at the foot of the stairs, with the boy beside me. The stairs rose steeply for two flights, with a single landing between. Beyond the stairs, a dirt pathway curved to the right, disappearing among thick-growing scrub trees.

Two teenage boys, both Chinese, stood midway up the first flight of stairs. They were looking up the hill, toward the narrow, forested pathway. Climbing toward them, I took my shield case from my pocket. One of the boys turned, looked at the shield, looked at my gun, then nudged his companion with one hand while he pointed up the hill with the other hand. Like John, his eyes widened with excitement.

"He went that way," the youth said. "Up there. Running like hell." Then, puzzled, he looked down at John. Canelli was on the stairs below me now, puffing as he climbed.

"Listen—" I gripped the taller teenager's arm, pointing down to the street below. "There'll be police here in a few minutes. Backup. Tell them we're up here. My name is Hastings. Lieutenant Hastings. Tell them I'm in pursuit of a fugitive. Hot pursuit."

"Yeah. Right. Come on, Richard." He grabbed his friend's arm.

"And take him with you." I pointed to John. Then I turned to Canelli, pointing up the hill. "He's there. Up there. Off the pathway." And to the teenage boy I said, "Did you see which way he turned?"

"To the right, it looked like. He followed the path, is all I could see."

"It goes up the hill," John piped. "Up to Coit Tower. I go up there all the time, up those paths."

"All right—" I nodded to the taller teenager. "Go on—take him. Get him out of here. What's your name?"

"Wayne. Wayne Gee."

"Well, take him, Wayne, and don't—"

"But I don't *wanna* go," John shrilled. "I wanna go with you. I wanna—"

"Listen, John—" I bent double, grasping his shoulder,

hard. With my face inches from his, I said, "You're not going with us. You're going down to the sidewalk, with Wayne. Either you go with him, or you'll spend another night in the Youth Guidance Center. And that's a promise. Understand?"

Suddenly his face clouded—then stubbornly hardened. I'd seen that expression before, when he was making his mother obey his querulous demands. With Durkin escaping and darkness falling, I was wasting valuble seconds arguing with a spoiled child.

"Oh, Jesus—" I relaxed my grip. Pleading now: "Please. Go down the stairs. He could have a gun. You could be shot, if you go with us. You could be killed, for God's sake."

"Then I wanna stay here," he answered petulantly. "Right here, on the stairs. Besides, you never showed me your handcuffs. And you promised."

Desperate, I straightened, turned to the younger teenager. "You watch for our backup, down on the street, Richard. Tell them what's happened, where we are. And you—" I turned to Wayne. "You stay here, with him." Vehemently I pushed John toward the youth. "Keep him here. Hold him here. Any way you want, just hold him."

"Right—" Wayne stepped closer to John. Wayne's face was serious; his arms flexed purposefully.

I returned the shield to my pocket and started up the stairs, with Canelli beside me. Overhead, the trees grew thick. In seconds, we were on the path. Ahead, to the right, the path forked. The shadows around us were deepening fast.

"Jeez, Lieutenant," Canelli said uneasily, "he could be anywhere up here, and we'd never see him."

"I know." At the intersection of the two leaf-strewn pathways now, I pointed to the steepest one. "Let's try that."

"Do you think he's got a gun?" Canelli whispered.

"I didn't see one."

The uphill path was narrower, forcing us to walk in single file. Below us, I thought I could hear John's voice, still protesting shrilly. I wondered whether Wayne was restraining him. Then I heard the sound of a police siren. I remembered

the pickup truck, blocking traffic—and remembered the driver's keys, still in my pocket. By now, Telegraph Hill's closed-circuit traffic would be stopped cold. Unless the pickup had been pushed into a driveway, clearing traffic, our backup would have to walk the last half mile.

"Jeez," Canelli breathed, looking apprehensively from side to side, "this is like jungle warfare, or something."

With the light failing, it was impossible to see more than a few feet into the tangle of trees beside the path. As we continued uphill, I was trying to decide on my next move. If Durkin kept away from Telegraph Place and off the pathways, he could easily stay concealed on the forested hillside until darkness fell. Then he could walk out anywhere, join with other pedestrians. There was no way we could deploy enough men to seal off Telegraph Hill, even in full daylight. Durkin could—

From behind and below, from the direction we'd just come, I heard a thin, sharp voice: unmistakably John's voice. Instantly, another voice joined his. Both voices were startled—then alarmed. Then frightened.

"That's the kid," Canelli said. "John."

"Give it to me." I took the walkie-talkie, described the public stairway where he'd left John, and called an emergency. As I talked, transmitting in the blind, I walked back down the hill, taking the lead. I released the radio's "transmit" button, handed the radio back to Canelli. We couldn't wait for an acknowledgment.

Fifty feet ahead, the narrow path we were using joined the wider path, which led downhill to our left, opening on the concrete pedestrian stairway.

Could we be seen from the stairs when we ventured out onto the wider pathway?

"Let's take it easy," I said over my shoulder. "Slow and easy, single file."

"Right."

As I spoke, I saw a young couple walking fast along the

wide path ahead, going downhill. They'd heard the cries, and were going to help.

"Hey—" I called softly to them, once more taking out my shield. This time, I pinned the badge to my lapel, ordering Canelli to do the same.

Uncertainly, the young couple hesitated, staring open-mouthed at my revolver. Then the girl nudged her companion, pointing to my chest. She'd seen the shield. When I beckoned for them to join us on the narrow, tree-arched tunnel of the smaller pathway, they obeyed.

"This is police business," I said. "You stay here, out of sight. Anyone else that comes, tell them to do the same. Don't let them get out on those stairs. Okay?"

Excited, they nodded in unison. "Yes," the girl breathed. "Okay." I saw the boy nudge the girl, then slip his arm around her waist. This day they would long remember.

I stepped cautiously into the wide path, looking to my left, toward the stairs. The upper flight of stairs was deserted. But, because of the angle, the topmost step cut off my view of the lower flight, below the single landing.

"Okay—" I gestured for Canelli to follow me, then motioned for him to walk to my right, close to the trees. To the left, I did the same.

As we drew closer to the top step, cautiously advancing, the lower flight of stairs came slowly into view. And then I saw them: first the top of Durkin's head, then the taller Chinese youth's head.

I saw the shorter teenager's head.

Then John's head.

Then I saw Durkin's right arm, cocked. The right hand held a large rock.

"Christ," Canelli said. "Jesus Christ. Look at that."

"You stay here," I said. "Call it in. Stay out of sight. Stay on the radio until you find out about backup. Make sure the backup's got an officer, and tell him what we've got here. Make sure they've got shotguns. Let's take it slow and easy. Clear?"

"Yessir." Canelli stepped back out of sight, holstered his weapon and switched on the walkie-talkie.

Durkin had seen me—seen my head and shoulders. In recognition, challenging me, he called out a garbled obscenity. His eyes blazed, locked with mine.

I drew a deep, shaky breath, holstered my gun, then began walking down the stairs, one slow, deliberate step at a time. As I descended, the scene below came fully into view. Durkin was crouched about ten steps up from street level, with his back pressed against the brick retaining wall that ran up the hill on either side of the steps. He held John clamped close to his body, using the same stranglehold taught in the police academy. The rock, half as large as John's head, was held in Durkin's big, muscular right hand, about a foot from the boy's head. Both Durkin and John were facing me. Wayne, the taller of the two teenagers, was also on the steps, about halfway between Durkin and the street. The shorter Chinese youth, the one I'd told to direct our backup, was at street level, surrounded by a knot of spectators. He was pointing up the stairs. Anxious, avid faces followed his gesture.

"I'll smash his skull," Durkin screamed at me. "You try to take me, I'll smash his skull."

I extended my arms out from my body, palms to the front. "I'm not trying to take you, Durkin." I descended another step. Only a dozen steps separated us now.

"You will, though, you son of a bitch. You, and all the rest of them."

"Listen, Durkin—" I took another step—and another. I could see every detail of John Kramer's face. His eyes, enormous, were fixed on mine. But I couldn't see fear in his eyes, only a kind of frozen fascination. His mouth was clamped shut, his chin was firm. Incredibly, he didn't appear frightened. Even when he momentarily turned his head to look at the rock, he didn't flinch.

"Listen, Durkin, you aren't doing yourself any good, you know. You're—"

"That's far enough. Stop right there."

"Okay—" Quickly, I obeyed. Less than ten feet between us. If I could brace myself, I could throw a tackle. In moments, Canelli would be on him, too.

But what would happen to the boy in the struggle, crashing down the concrete stairs? Even if the rock missed him, he could strike his head on the steps. A concussion could follow, even death.

"Take out your gun," Durkin ordered.

I shook my head. "No. Not the gun."

"I can kill him, with this—" Like some furious, half-coherent caveman, he brandished the huge rock. "And I will, too. I'll smash his fucking head."

"You can't have the gun, Durkin. No way."

"You'd better give it to me. I'll give you three. I'll count to three. Then I'm going to smash his fucking—"

"You're going to murder a six-year-old kid? In front of witnesses? Is that what you're telling me?"

"I'm telling you that I want the gun. And I—I want *out*. *That's* what I'm telling you. I'm telling you that I'm not going back inside. It—it was an accident, what happened with Quade. It was a fucking accident, and there's no way I'm going to pay, no way I'm going to—" Suddenly, hysterically, his voice broke. I saw tears in his eyes, streaking his cheeks. John, age six, was dry-eyed. But Durkin, with his weight lifter's muscles and his bully-boy eyes, was losing control.

If I could keep him talking, I could take him.

"You say it was an accident," I said. "If that's true, tell us about it. But don't do this, for God's sake. Don't do this to yourself. You'll just—"

Involuntarily, I broke off as I caught sight of Wayne, half concealed behind Durkin. Crouched low, the teenager was slowly, purposefully advancing on the man and the boy, from three or four steps below. Instantly—incredulously—I realized what was about to happen. The youth was going to attack Durkin.

I must keep Durkin talking, must keep his attention fixed on me. "You'll just make it worse for yourself, doing this.

Because there's no way you're going to win, Durkin. Not like this. You'll only—"

I saw Wayne's body snap straight, saw his hands reach for the rock. In the same instant, sensing the movement behind him, Durkin turned to face the threat, drawing back the rock, poised to strike. As I leaped forward, I called out for Canelli. My leap was short; my left foot struck the edge of the third step below, throwing me off balance. But my right foot found solid purchase; my body was arching forward, committed. I caught Durkin with both arms around the waist. John was down on the steps beneath me, screaming. I braced myself, heaved, felt Durkin stagger, fall off balance. The rock crashed on the steps, bounced once. With my arms still locked around Durkin's waist, with my face fast against his chest, I heaved again. We were falling together, grappling, rolling down the sharp, cruel concrete steps. Wayne was calling out for his friend: "Richard, Richard." Durkin was struggling with a wild man's strength, almost free of my grasp. I must hold on, must keep my arms locked around him, keep my head pressed to his chest, keep close to him, protected from his flailing arms. Wherever he went, I thought wildly, he'd have to drag me—me and Wayne—still clinging to Durkin's right arm. As the three of us tumbled down the stairs, we were—

A shot exploded close above me. And a second shot. My ears were ringing; I couldn't hear what Canelli was shouting.

But, suddenly, I felt Durkin's body go slack.

Instantly, I rolled free, backed away, staggered to my feet, drew my revolver. Durkin was on his knees, head hanging, his body pressed against the brick retaining wall. Was he wounded? Had Canelli shot him? At the thought, numbly, I shook my head. Canelli couldn't have done it—*shouldn't* have done it. Crouched over my revolver, I asked, "Is he all right?"

"He's all right," Canelli answered. "He's okay, don't worry."

Still crouched on all fours, still with his head hanging low, still with his body pressed close to the brick wall, Durkin

looked like a refugee who'd been caught in an air raid, cravenly cowering, dumbly trying to save himself from terror from above. The two Chinese youths stood back from Durkin, looking solemnly down at him. The boldest of the onlookers came closer. They were staring at Durkin as if he were an animal behind bars. Wayne was daubing at a bloody nose—and smiling widely. Suddenly, exuberantly, Richard pounded him on the back, as if he'd scored a touchdown, or made a game-winning basket. Both boys were talking Chinese—laughing boisterously—pounding each other.

"Hey—" It was John's voice, behind me. Keeping my gun trained on Durkin, I put my left arm around the boy's shoulders, drawing him close.

"Are you all right, John?"

Looking up into my face, he nodded gravely. Then, in a hushed voice, he said, "He didn't hurt me. But he sure scared me."

My sudden laugh tittered on hysteria's edge, the backwash of fear, of my adrenaline's rush.

"He scared me, too, John. Anybody's not scared of someone like that, he's crazy."

"I always hated him," the boy answered seriously. "I always did."

For a moment we stood silently, close together, while Canelli holstered his revolver and handcuffed the suspect. Still with his head hanging low, Durkin made no move to resist. Once his hands were cuffed behind his back, Canelli offered to let him rise to his feet, but the suspect only shook his head. From down below, more of the onlookers began venturing up the stairs for a closer look at the beaten captive. The spectators who stayed below were pointing, babbling among themselves.

I holstered my revolver and looked closely at John. "You're not hurt, are you? Anywhere?"

He lifted his arm, twisted so I could see a scraped elbow, oozing blood. "That's all."

"Good." I kept my arm around his shoulders. "As soon

as our backup comes—more police—I'll take you to your mother. Okay?" As I drew him close to me, I remembered how it used to feel, holding my own son close, comforting him.

For a moment he didn't reply. Then, still speaking in a slow, somber voice, he said, "I want my daddy, too. I want to see my daddy. Can I see him?"

I took a deep breath. "Soon, maybe. Not right now. But maybe soon."

As he nodded, I felt him grasp the slack of my trousers. It was another long-forgotten moment of precious memory: the small, trusting hand, holding on.

"Good," he said. "That's good."

EIGHTEEN

"I TELL YOU, IT WAS AN ACCIDENT. IT—IT WAS QUADE'S FAULT. All his fault. Ask Mr. Guest. Have you called Mr. Guest? Have you talked to Mr. Guest—asked him about me?"

"We're talking to you, Durkin," Friedman said. "When we finish with you, we'll talk to Mr. Guest. And everyone else connected with the case, too. But now it's your turn. All yours."

"It's because of my record," Durkin muttered. "If I didn't have any record, I wouldn't even be here."

"You're here because you tried to run, Durkin," I said. "You tried to run, and you got caught. You got caught with a lethal weapon in your hand, threatening to commit murder."

"I've got a right to a lawyer."

"That's right," Friedman said, "you have. But you haven't called anyone—a lawyer, or anyone else."

"I'm waiting for Marie to call. I've got to wait for her."

"It's been three hours since you were arrested," I said. "She's known for three hours that you're here. I told her myself, when I took John home. And she hasn't called."

"You wouldn't tell me if she called." He spoke sullenly, sulkily. Sitting slumped at the interrogation room's small steel table, both elbows propped on the table, Durkin was a

defeated, deflated incarnation of the arrogant bully with the angry eyes and the bulging muscles that I'd first seen only three days before. He seemed, literally, to have lost substance. When our backup arrived, and I pulled him to his feet on the steps of Telegraph Hill, his arms and his torso had gone slack, unresisting. It was fear that had stolen his strength, left him suddenly so helpless. I'd felt that same kind of debilitation before, many times. Durkin knew he was going back inside prison walls. He knew he could go all the way—to death row. And the sudden, overpowering realization had left him without strength or hope, without even the will to resist. He was a lost soul. And he knew it.

"We'd tell you if Marie called," I said. "You know we'd tell you."

He shook his head, but didn't reply.

"Listen, Durkin—" I leaned across the interrogation table. "Why don't you tell us about it, make it easy on yourself? You know how it goes: You help us, we'll help you. Give us something we can give the D.A., so he'll look good. And you'll get a deal. It's guaranteed, you'll get a deal. But this way, not talking, you're just making it hard on yourself."

"You're forcing us to guess," Friedman said. "And that's always bad. We guess, we think the worst, not the best. It's only human nature."

"You said it was Quade's fault," I said. "What'd you mean, Durkin?"

"It was his fault. All his fault."

"He fired first. Is that it?"

The suspect made no reply, but only shook his head, slowly and hopelessly.

"You didn't go to the Guest house with the idea of killing anyone," Friedman said. He spoke softly, beguilingly, subtly inviting the suspect's confidence. "Did you?"

"No. I already told you that."

"Then why'd you go?"

Durkin shook his head again. Doggedly. Desperately.

I sat silently for a moment, studying him. Why did he

refuse to talk? He protested his innocence, but would go no farther, would say no more. Why? He didn't want a lawyer. He just wanted to talk to Marie Kramer or Alexander Guest. Why? Was he protecting one of them?

Both of them?

I didn't know, couldn't guess. I could only blunder blindly ahead, hoping eventually to find the right combination of fact and fiction that would start him talking.

"You followed John," I said. "That's it, isn't it? You were protecting John. So you followed him to Alexander Guest's house." I glanced at Friedman, who took up the slender thread.

"That was your job, to protect John. But you didn't know Quade was doing the same job—at the same time, at the same place."

"It was dark," I said, remembering John's testimony. "It was dark inside the house. And Quade had a gun. You thought he was Kramer, stealing John. You fired. And then Quade—"

"*No.*" Suddenly his head snapped up, his eyes came feverishly alive. "No. He shot first. Quade. That's what I'm trying to tell you. It was dark, like you said. And I didn't know my way around, in there. It was like a—a fun house, or something, it was so dark in that hallway. But finally I found John's room. There was enough light coming through the window so I could see the toys. So I went inside, and saw he wasn't there. And right away I knew what happened. They went out by another door, the two of them. So then I was going out again, into the hallway, when I saw something—heard something, I don't know which. I was going to get out, go back the way I came. But then there came this shot, this goddam shot, out of nowhere. I—I shot back, at the flash, I guess. I shot, and I heard him groan. Then he shot again. And then I heard him fall. I—I remember standing there. I couldn't move. It was like my—my feet were stuck to the floor. It was only a second, but it seemed like forever, standing there. And then he—God—he started moaning, and asking for help. I—"

He broke off. Staring down at the table, mouth twitching, trembling, he drew a shaking hand across his forehead and momentarily down over his haunted eyes, as if to block out the memory of murder. Finally the hand fell listlessly away.

"But I—I couldn't. I know I should've helped him, but I couldn't. So I—I split."

"You went out through the garage," I said. "You went out the way you came in—the same way Kramer went in."

He nodded. "Yeah. Right."

"The gun," Friedman said. "Your gun. It was the Kramers' gun. Marie Kramer's gun. Right?"

"Yeah. Right."

"You took the gun with you," I said. Then, mindful of the microphone concealed in the room's ceiling fixture, I said, "When you left Guest's house, you took the gun with you—the .38 Smith and Wesson revolver."

He shook his head in a slow, exhausted arc. "No. I left it there. In the hallway."

Friedman and I exchanged a quick, significant glance.

"You didn't take the gun outside the house?" I asked. "Are you sure?"

He nodded. "I'm sure. I left it on the floor. I remember because I bent down, and put it on the floor, instead of dropping it. I—" His mouth twitched in a grotesque shadow of a smile. "I didn't want it to go off, I guess."

"But you wiped the gun," I pressed. "You wiped off your fingerprints, before you put the gun on the floor."

He shook his head. "No. I thought about it, afterwards. I knew I should've done it. But it was too late, then. And, sure as hell, I wasn't going back."

Friedman and I exchanged another glance. Frowning thoughtfully, Friedman said, "You thought the figure in the hallway was Kramer. Is that right?"

"Yeah. Right."

"And he—Quade, actually—fired first."

"Right."

"Then you fired."

"Yeah."

"Then he fired again."

"Yeah."

"Three shots, altogether."

"Right. Three shots."

"You're positive about all this," I said. "He fired, and you fired, and then he fired again."

"Right."

I nodded. "Then you put the gun on the floor, and you went out through the garage, the way you came in—the way Kramer came in."

"Yeah."

"So you thought it was Kramer that you'd hit." Friedman spoke softly. "It was dark and you couldn't recognize whoever it was on the floor. But you thought it was Kramer."

Durkin nodded. "I didn't even know who Quade was until I read it in the papers the next day."

"You knew that Kramer was arrested, though."

"Sure. But that's all I knew."

Both Friedman and I sat silently for a moment, studying the suspect. Was this the time to question Durkin on the inconsistencies in his answers? Or should we get his whole story first? I gestured to Friedman, inviting him to take a turn.

"We know what happened after you got to the Guest house," Friedman said. "Why'd you go there in the first place?"

Durkin frowned, looking at Friedman. "What'd you mean?"

"Did you know Kramer was there, intending to take John?"

Durkin nodded; he understood the question. "When he hired me, Mr. Guest told me why he was doing it, that he expected Kramer to make a try for the kid. He showed me pictures of Kramer. Lots of pictures, even a videotape. And then he told me what he expected me to do. He took a long time, told me about the divorce agreement, and everything.

He told me, several times, that Kramer couldn't see John without his mother gives her permission. So if Kramer comes to town and sees John without checking with Marie—Mrs. Kramer—then he's in contempt of court. He's breaking the law."

Friedman nodded. "That's probably right."

"And Mr. Guest also said that if Kramer tried to take John out of the state, that was even worse. But he said that the police couldn't stop him without an order from a judge. And that'd be too late. He'd already be long gone, Mr. Guest said, by the time the judge got around to putting out a bench warrant, or whatever they call it."

Friedman frowned again. "He was right. No question."

Durkin hesitated, looking at Friedman with obvious calculation, deciding what to say next—deciding how much to tell, and how much to hold back. Finally, tentatively, Durkin said, "Mr. Guest said—other things, too."

Even though it was obvious that Durkin might be about to reveal something important, Friedman spoke casually as he asked, "What other things?"

"He said that if Kramer should come inside the house—Mrs. Kramer's house—and try to take John away, then he'd be just like a criminal. A housebreaker. And he said that if that should ever happen—" Durkin licked nervously at his lips, then said, "If that should ever happen, and I should—" He swallowed. "He said, that if I should shoot him, then the law would be on my side. And, what's more—" Once again, his uneasy eyes sought ours. "What's more, he said that he'd be grateful, if that happened. It was—you know—like he was offering a reward."

"You'd use Mrs. Kramer's gun," Friedman said. "If Kramer ever tried to break in, you'd use Marie Kramer's gun."

"Right." He hesitated, then asked, "Is that really true? Is it really the law, that you can shoot someone who breaks into your house?"

"That's the law," Friedman answered. "It's meant to favor the owner of the house, of course. But, if you're

employed to guard the house and an intruder enters, then you can shoot him, no question."

"Yeah—" Slowly, he nodded. "That's what he said. Mr. Guest, I mean."

"Did you keep the gun in your room?" Friedman asked.

"No. It was always in her room. Marie's."

"So you went to her room and got the gun, Friday night."

"I got it in the afternoon, when I saw Kramer. He was parked down the hill. I saw him there, when I drove John home from school. I recognized him from all the pictures I saw of him."

"Did John see him?"

"No. But he saw John. I saw him looking at John—looking hard. So, when we got inside the house, I got the gun."

"Was Mrs. Kramer home?" I asked.

"No. She went out for lunch—and stayed out." He looked at me aside, plainly trying to decide how much to tell about Marie Kramer's habits. Finally he said, "That's what she usually does, on Fridays. She leaves for lunch—and doesn't come back, usually. At least, not until late."

"And Mr. Guest comes for John Friday afternoons."

He nodded.

"When Guest showed up," Friedman said, "was Kramer still parked outside?"

"I didn't see him. But I figured he was."

Remembering the geography of Telegraph Hill, I said, "From inside the house, you couldn't see him. You figured he was parked around a curve in the road, watching. Is that it?"

Durkin nodded. "Yeah. That's it."

"You didn't tell Guest that you'd seen Kramer."

"No."

"Why not?"

"Well, I guess I figured—you know—that I'd see what happened."

Friedman frowned. "What'd you mean by that?"

"Well—" Defensively, Durkin shrugged. "You know—I

was remembering what Mr. Guest said, about how grateful he'd be, and everything, if I could help him out. So, what the hell—" He shrugged again.

"You figured Mr. Guest would be grateful. If you helped out, you thought he'd reward you. So you thought you'd let matters develop to the point where you could help."

"Yeah. Well—" Plaintively, he spread his hands. "What's wrong with that?"

"So when Guest left with John, about 4:30 Friday afternoon," I said, "you waited for Kramer to follow them. Then you followed Kramer. Is that right?"

"Yeah. Right."

"And you took the gun," Friedman said. "You figured that, if Kramer tried to take the boy, you'd stop him."

Wearily—hopelessly—Durkin sighed, dropping his eyes. Once more, fear had deflated him. "Yeah. Something like that."

"If you got the chance, you'd kill him."

"*No.*" Sharply, he shook his head. "No, that's not the way it was. I—I just—"

"Go ahead with the story. Tell us what happened. Exactly what happened."

"Well, it's like you said. I took the car—the Mercedes—and followed Kramer. I'm surprised he didn't see me, but he didn't. I followed him until about eight o'clock, when Guest and John finally went home."

"Were you supposed to drive Mrs. Kramer's car? Was it all right with her?"

"Sure. I drive it all the time. Not for pleasure, or anything. But she doesn't drive, see. She'd had her license lifted."

"So you waited until Kramer went inside the Guest house," I said, visualizing the scene as I spoke. "You waited until one o'clock, when he went down the driveway, and entered the garage. You gave him a minute, then you followed him. You had the gun. You went in through the garage, and

then into the house, from the garage—the same way Kramer went in. Am I right so far?"

He nodded. "Yeah, you're right. Just right."

"But you'd never been inside the house," Friedman said. "So you were confused about the layout. You didn't know there was another way out—the way Kramer and John took. So when you saw Quade, you thought he was Kramer. So you shot him. You remembered what Guest said, about being grateful if you shot Kramer. And it'd be legal, too—you thought. Because Kramer would be housebreaking, you thought the law would protect you. So you shot him. You didn't just shoot him once, either. You shot him twice, just to make sure. But then you saw that you'd made a mistake. It was a stranger lying there. A perfect stranger. So you panicked. You took your gun, and you ran. Then you realized that you had to ditch the gun. So you—"

"*No.*" Suddenly he threw himself back from the table, threw his arms out wide, as if he were on stage, extravagantly acting out his plea for innocence. His eyes were wild, his lips were drawn back from his teeth. His handsome beach-bum's face had suddenly become a death's head of terror. "No. You're—Christ—you're lying. You—you're like all of them, all the rest of them. I—I made a mistake. One mistake, years ago. And so all my life, my whole life, I've got to—" His words choked him. His arms fell slack at his sides. His head fell forward, chin on chest, as suddenly as if his neck had snapped.

I looked at Friedman, who moved his head toward the door. It was time to take a break—to compare notes.

NINETEEN

FRIEDMAN HANDED THE MENU TO THE WAITRESS, NODDED HIS thanks and said to me; "Let's suppose, just for argument's sake, that Durkin's telling the truth."

"Why would you assume that he's telling the truth?" The question had been sharper than I'd intended. I knew why. The time was almost midnight, and Friedman was still expansively theorizing, indifferent to the clock. Ann was probably already in bed—without me. Once again, without me. Twice during the past four nights, without me.

"Wait—" Friedman raised a pudgy, pontifical hand. "Hear me out. Make your mind a blank. Okay?"

Resigned, I shrugged.

"The reason I'm wondering whether he's telling the truth," Friedman said, "is that his story and Kramer's story and John's story all match. Now, you may say that they're all lying. That's possible, I guess. Kramer and his son could be lying, which would account for the fact that their stories match. But how do we account for Durkin's story matching Kramer's? There's no way Kramer and Durkin could've gotten together, to fix up a story. None at all. So it seems to me that we've got to at least try and figure out why—how—their

stories match. And the most obvious explanation—the easiest one—is that they're telling the truth. All three of them."

"Except that—"

"Wait—" Once more, he raised his hand. "I know what you're going to say. Their stories might agree, but they don't fit the facts, the physical evidence. Namely, none of their stories, separately or added together, account for either the number of shots that were actually fired or the location of the murder weapon in the shrubbery in front of Guest's house, or the fact that the gun was wiped clean. That's what you were going to say. Am I right?"

"You're right. Absolutely."

"Okay—" Obviously enjoying himself now, he settled more comfortably in his chair across the table. I recognized the smug, self-satisfied look in his eyes, and the comfortably complacent note in his voice. He'd developed a new theory. This was Friedman's favorite sport: trying out a new theory on me. "If we assume," he said, "that the three stories we've gotten are true, and if we also assume that Guest's testimony is true, then there's only one set of circumstances that'd make everything add up." He paused one last long, playfully portentous moment before he pronounced: "Someone else got into the house after both Kramer and Durkin left. He—or she—picked up the gun Durkin had dropped. He fired the gun into Quade's neck, killing him. Then he—or she—wiped the gun, ditched it in the shrubbery, and disappeared."

"She . . . You mean . . . ?"

"Talk to her," Friedman said. "Talk to her tomorrow morning, in the cold light of day. Before she starts drinking. Okay?"

"Yes—" I spoke absently, thoughtfully, struggling to fit Marie Kramer into the puzzle as a reasonable suspect. "Yes. Okay."

The next morning at 9:15 A.M., back on Telegraph Hill, walking slowly toward the Kramer house along the same sidewalk Durkin had taken, trying to escape, I was still

struggling to imagine a scenario that would make Marie Kramer a murderer. No question, she'd had the opportunity—or, at least, the potential opportunity. By her own statement, she'd been out on the town, barhopping. She'd arrived home "about 1:30," probably alone, doubtless drunk. Between midnight and a few minutes after 1:00 A.M., she probably couldn't account for her whereabouts. She'd been in a bar—any bar—drinking. Going from bar to bar, and going from the last bar to her home, she'd taken cabs, her usual practice.

Could she have discovered that Kramer was in town, that he intended to steal John?

Could the knowledge have enraged her?

Looking for Kramer, could she have taken a cab to her father's house, entered the mansion through the garage? Drunk, confused, could she have found Quade, found the gun lying close by? Could she have killed him? Could she have wiped the gun, ditched it, and taken another cab home?

It was possible. It would account for the fourth shot, account for the gun in the shrubbery, wiped clean. It would also fit perfectly with Durkin's story—and with the three other stories: Kramer's, John's, Alexander Guest's.

The time frame would fit, too. Guest could have heard three shots, could have seen Kramer on the driveway while Durkin was still inside the house. Guest could have left his post at the window and gotten his revolver while Durkin was leaving the house, unseen. Guest could have been going downstairs when the fourth shot sounded—the fatal shot. He could have looked outside again, seen his daughter leaving. When he'd found Quade dead, he could have reconstructed the sequence of events, realized what must have happened. Since Guest hadn't seen Durkin, he would have assumed that Marie had fired the fourth shot. At all costs, he would have wanted to protect his daughter, protect the Guest name. So he'd accuse Kramer of the murder. Understandably. If Kramer were indicted for murder, Guest's fondest, most malicious dreams would come true. Kramer would be out of his life, possibly forever.

But, when all the loose ends had been neatly tied together, one question remained: Why would she have done it?

Why would she have killed Charlie Quade, an ex cop hired by her father to guard her son?

Could she have thought Quade was Kramer?

It was the only theory that made sense, the only theory that could account for all the facts, all the possibilities. For whatever drunken reason, she'd thought she was killing her husband, who was trying to take her child away.

But did she hate her husband enough to want him dead?

Sober, she didn't. Sober, she regretted their divorce, regretted the loss of her husband. Even drunk, she hadn't expressed hatred for Gordon Kramer. Only wistfulness. Defeat. Infinite regret for her own futile life.

I pushed the doorbell three times before the door opened. Marie Kramer stood tentatively in the open doorway, blinking in the bright sunlight. Her face was pale and blotched, unadorned by lipstick or makeup. Her hair was uncombed. She was dressed in blue jeans and a khaki bush shirt, worn shirttail out. Her feet were bare. Obviously, she'd gotten out of bed to answer the doorbell. The uncompromising morning light fell mercilessly on her face, revealing premature lines and creases at cheek and forehead, purplish shadows under the eyes, an uncertain twitching of the mouth as she tried to smile—and failed. The terrible, naked vulnerability of the face was painful to see, bearing down the head with the ageless weight of misery and defeat.

Friedman had been right. This was the time and the place to get the truth from Marie Kramer.

"Lieutenant Hastings . . ." As she squinted uncertainly at me, I realized that the morning sun fell just behind me in the sky, brighter than any interrogation room's spotlight, focused on the suspect's eyes. This morning, even nature was with me.

"We've got to talk, Mrs. Kramer. Just the two of us. No witnesses. Just us." As I spoke, I stepped forward. If she was alone in the house, there was no one to stop me.

She didn't resist. Shoulders slumped, head low, her bare feet shuffling, she simply turned away from the door and began climbing the stairs heavily, one slow, uncertain step at a time. I closed the front door and followed her. At the top of the stairs she half turned, saying over her shoulder, "John's still sleeping. Let's go in the kitchen." She led the way to a kitchen that looked as if it had been created for a magazine cover, with its enormous burnished copper hood over a main cooking center, its colorful Mexican tile counters and floors, its maple tables and chairs. The walls were planked redwood; the plate glass window framed the city's skyscraper spires in the foreground and a crystal-blue marine view beyond.

"Coffee?" With her back to me, she went to the stove and turned on a burner under a copper teakettle. Then she lifted the kettle, shook it, frowned, and filled it from a tap. "Is instant all right?"

"Yes. Fine."

"Sit down." She gestured to a counter. I took one of the four barstools in front of the counter, and she took another one, with an empty stool between us. Still without looking at me directly, staring instead down at the tiled counter top, she said, "So Bruce did it. Not Gordon. Bruce."

Instead of answering I asked, "How's John doing? Is he all right? Any aches or pains?"

"He's all right," she answered dully. "He was—subdued when you brought him home yesterday evening. But, later on, he snapped back. Apparently he always hated Bruce. That helped, I suppose." She sat motionless, staring down at the counter. Then, woodenly, without inflection, she said, "I didn't know that John and Bruce hated each other. I—" She broke off, shaking her head as she traced a small design on the counter with her forefinger. "I never knew, until yesterday. Until it was almost too late."

I decided not to reply.

"John says that you saved his life," she said. "You're his hero. Did you know that? You're—" She bit her lip. Now her

hand lay listless on the counter. On the third finger of her left hand, I saw a wedding band.

"You're almost the only hero he's ever had," she said finally. "He was only three when Gordon left. So he's never—"

The kettle was boiling. She made instant coffee, put the steaming mugs on the counter, along with sugar and cream, paper napkins, and two spoons. She resumed her seat, resumed speaking in the same dull, defeated voice. "I was—drinking yesterday, when you brought John home after Bruce—" She broke off, blinked, bit her lip. "After Bruce almost killed him. I—" She shook her head. "I didn't know that he'd even gone out. I didn't know that Bruce had gone, either. As soon as you left, I poured a drink." She grimaced, as if the words had caused her pain. "Or, rather, I poured another drink."

I considered telling her that I knew what she was feeling. I would never forget the lost, lonely terror of the morning after. I would never forget the utter emptiness of those mornings, the crushing weight of shame and despair. And, most of all, I would never forget the emptiness, the vast, bottomless abyss that was always waiting, always beckoning.

Already, I knew, she was beginning to think of the day's first drink. It was her only hope of getting through this day, of avoiding that constant abyss.

Instead, though, I cleared my throat, dropped my voice to a lower, more official note and said, "Mrs. Kramer, this whole situation has changed, just since yesterday. I guess you know that. Frankly, this new development—Durkin, that is—came as a complete surprise to us. He's admitted shooting Quade. Did you know that? He admitted taking your gun, and going to your father's house and exchanging shots with Quade." Turned on the stool to watch her face, I stopped speaking. I wanted to see how she reacted, either by word or by gesture, or facial twitch.

But she didn't answer, gave no indication that she'd heard what I'd said.

Still with my eyes searching her face, I let the silence

lengthen inexorably. Finally her mouth began to tremble, then twist into a tortured counterfeit of an ironic smile.

"I wonder if you know how little I care." She sat for a moment in a silence of her own choice, with her head bent over her coffee, still untasted. Then she said, "When Bruce first came here, after a suitable interval, I invited him into my bed, as the euphemism goes. So—" She shook her head. "So we've got an interesting situation here, haven't we? Two men—two of my former lovers, we might say—have been accused of murdering the man my father hired to protect my son from his father, my ex-husband. Which is to say that this whole thing revolves around me—around me, and John. But—" She shrugged her bony shoulders, then used one hand to push back her tangled hair. When she'd shrugged, I'd seen the outline of her breasts, sagging under the khaki shirt. With her lined, middle-aged face and her slackening figure, Marie Kramer would have to settle for second pickings at the singles' bars—or third pickings, on a busy night.

"But none of it matters to me," she said. "I can't *make* it matter." With great effort, she turned her stricken eyes to me. It was a gesture of trust—desperate trust. "Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Yes, Mrs. Kramer. I think I understand what you're saying. I really think I do."

She nodded, a loose, exhausted inclination of her head. Once again, her hair fell down over her eyes. She sighed, pushed back the hair, and returned her eyes to her coffee mug. "Maybe you do understand," she said. "Maybe you don't. It doesn't really matter." Once more, she fell into a musing, brooding silence. Then the tortured smile returned. "It's ironic, you know. John's finally found a hero—the man who arrested his father."

"Mrs. Kramer, I—"

"It *is* ironic, isn't it?" she insisted. "You do see the irony, don't you?"

"Yes," I answered, heavily. "I see the irony."

"I thought you would." As she said it, her voice

hardened. She got down off the stool, took the mug of coffee and poured some of the coffee into the sink.

"If you'll excuse me a moment," she said, "I think I'll spike this. Ordinarily I don't do that. Not before noon. But, so far, this day hasn't started out very well. And it doesn't promise to get any better. So extraordinary measures seem to be indicated."

"Mrs. Kramer—" I slid off my own stool, and stood in front of her. "Before you do that, let's talk. There're some questions that I want to ask you—that I've *got* to ask you. Let's do that, first. Then I'll be on my way."

For a moment her body tensed. Willfully, her face tightened, as if she were going to resist me. But then her body went slack. Shrugging indifferently, she put the mug in the sink and leaned back against the counter, crossing her arms beneath her sagging breasts.

"Go ahead," she said. As she spoke, her eyes hardened. "Go ahead. Talk. Ask." She looked full into my face, challenging me. Sober, she had some of her father's arrogance, the same arrogance she'd displayed the first time I'd talked to her. "This is your chance. Ask."

"Where were you Friday night between midnight and one o'clock?"

"Why're you asking?"

"I'm asking because there're still some loose ends. We've got four accounts of what happened Friday night. We've got your father's account, your husband's account, your son's account and Durkin's account. And they don't quite match. There's something missing—two pieces of the puzzle. We can't close the case, without those two pieces. So we've got to start over, start at the beginning."

"I've already told you where I was Friday. I was barhopping."

"And what time did you come home?"

"It was 1:30, I think. I've told you that, too."

"Did you come home alone?"

Ruefully, she nodded. "Unhappily, yes."

"Was Durkin home when you got here?"

"I don't know."

"Was the car in the garage?"

"I don't know that, either. I arrived in a cab—a Yellow Cab, incidentally. I paid the driver, and came inside, and went to bed. In that order."

I decided to shift ground. "The last time we talked, you asked me whether your gun killed Quade. Well, the answer is yes, as you suspected. We also know that Durkin took that gun to the scene of the crime. He fired at least one shot into the victim. Maybe two." I let a beat pass, watching her for some reaction, some sign of guilt or anxiety. She revealed nothing; she simply returned my gaze, calmly. "We aren't sure about the second shot," I said. "We aren't sure who fired it. Not yet."

Still, her dark, empty eyes revealed no anxiety, no emotion.

"When we talked," I said finally, "and I asked you about your gun, you said you hadn't seen it for two years. Yet, when I asked you if you thought it was still in your closet, you said it probably wasn't."

"I thought I'd explained that."

"You said that, because I was asking about the gun, you assumed it was the murder weapon. Right?"

Listlessly, she nodded. Now she took her coffee mug from the sink. Holding the mug in both hands, she began to drink. She drank in long, ragged, ravenous gulps, as if the coffee offered the same kind of hope that liquor promised.

"I think there was more to it than that, Mrs. Kramer. I think you knew that the gun wasn't there. I'm positive you knew it wasn't there."

Still drinking, she made no response. But, over the rim of the coffee mug, her eyes were watchful.

"I think you knew Quade had been killed with your gun. And I think you knew that gun had been left at the scene of the crime."

She put the mug aside, and shrugged. Her face was expressionless, registering neither fear nor anger. Was she so

drained of emotion, so empty inside, that she was indifferent to my suspicions—indifferent to her own danger?

"You think I killed that man." Her voice was as expressionless as her face. But, still, her eyes were covertly watchful.

Instead of replying, I drew a deep breath. Then, reluctantly, I advised Alexander Guest's daughter of her rights under the constitution as a suspect in a capital crime.

Now, finally, she reacted: a sardonic twist of the mouth, a cold, contemptuous hardness of the eye. "You must be crazy," she said, "accusing me of murder."

"I'm not accusing you of murder, Mrs. Kramer. I'm telling you, though, that you could be a suspect. I'm also telling you that I need to know two things. I need to know where you were—which bar—between midnight and one o'clock on Friday night. And then I need to know why your story concerning the gun doesn't agree with Durkin's. He says you showed him the gun when he first came here, six months ago. He says you showed him where you kept it, and asked him to unload it. But when I asked you who knew where the gun was kept, you didn't mention Durkin. You said that—"

"Hey—" It was John, tousle-headed, sleepy-eyed, dressed in *Superman* pajamas, standing in the kitchen doorway.

"What'd he say, when you took him to jail? Bruce—what'd he say? What'd he do?"

I thought about it for a moment. "He told us a lot of what we needed to know, John. Not everything. But a lot. How're you feeling today? Any aches or pains?"

"What about my daddy? Where's he?"

"We've still got some questions to ask your father, John. But we—"

From the front hallway I heard the sound of a latch clicking, of a door opening. Still in the kitchen doorway, John heard it, too, and turned inquiringly to look out into the hallway. Reflexively, I unbuttoned my jacket and stepped

forward, toward John. Before I reached him, I saw recognition animate his face. There was no danger, then

"Hi, Grandpa."

Followed by Michael Carmody, his assistant, Alexander Guest came up the front staircase to the hallway. The smile that Guest had for his grandson froze when he saw me standing behind the boy.

"Lieutenant Hastings." It was a cold greeting, clearly conveying his displeasure at finding me there. "Where's my daughter?"

"She's in the kitchen." I looked at the woman, unseen by her father. Her face, too, was frozen by obvious displeasure. Why? Why wouldn't she have been glad to see her father, who would certainly try to prevent me from continuing my interrogation?

Guest turned to his assistant, saying curtly, "Take the boy to his room." And to John, gently, he said, "You go with Michael, John. Go to your room, and stay there. Your mother and the lieutenant and I have things to talk about. I'll come and get you when we're finished. You'll be coming to my house for a few days. You might be thinking of whatever you want to take with you."

The boy's face clouded. "But I—"

"John. Don't argue. Some very important things are happening. And there isn't much time. Do as I say, please." Guest's voice was quiet, but its effect on John was crushing. Instantly, animation faded from the boy's face, replaced by a stolid, sullen compliance. With Carmody's hand on his shoulder, as heavy as any jailer's, John turned reluctantly away. As I watched him go, I remembered that I still hadn't shown him my handcuffs.

Guest turned on his heel and led the way to a door that opened on a small, book-lined room just off the large living room. "Let's talk in here," he said over his shoulder, gesturing for me to follow. And, louder, to his daughter: "Come into the study, Marie." Guest took the room's only chair, gesturing for Marie and me to sit on a leather couch, side by side. Marie was

about to sit when Guest ordered her to close the door. She obeyed without comment, then sat beside me. She carried her coffee mug, and as she sat beside me I caught the strong odor of liquor from the mug. I wondered how she'd managed it, in the few moments she'd been out of my sight.

Turning to me, Guest said, "It's ten o'clock in the morning, Lieutenant. It wasn't until an hour ago that your Lieutenant Friedman called to tell me Durkin was in custody. At the same time, I also learned that Durkin actually threatened to kill my grandson—actually menaced him, physically. All this I learned hours after the fact, by routine phone call. And, furthermore—" Obviously trying to control his mounting indignation, Guest broke off, drawing a long, deep breath. "Furthermore, I'm also told that Kramer could be released from custody—after he broke into my home, and took my grandchild, in defiance of a court ruling."

"He's being held on suspicion of murder, Mr. Guest. We've got to—"

"He's a criminal. A felon, actually. If I may take the liberty of instructing you on the law," he said contemptuously, "any person who enters another's premises for the purpose of doing that person harm can, literally, be shot to death by that householder, once the intruder crosses the threshold. Are you aware of that fact, Lieutenant?"

"Yessir, I am."

"And are you also aware that . . ."

His withering lecture continued, but his words began to run together as my thoughts strayed. I was remembering Durkin's statement that Alexander Guest had encouraged him to treat Kramer like a common housebreaker, if he ever tried to enter the Kramer premises. In effect, Guest had offered a bounty on Kramer, put a price on his head.

Had he made the same offer to Charlie Quade?

Could Guest have discovered Kramer was in San Francisco, and that he intended to steal his own child? Could Guest have had Kramer watched, spied on, in New York? It was possible. Probable, even. Durkin had seen videotapes of

Kramer, supplied by Guest. Meaning that, yes, Guest probably had Kramer under close surveillance in New York. And if electronic surveillance had been part of the package, Guest could easily have learned of Kramer's plans. He could have known Kramer's schedule, known the date of Kramer's arrival in San Francisco. He could have had Kramer followed from the airport to his hotel . . .

. . . and followed from his hotel wherever he went, from Wednesday to Friday night.

And, if all that were possible, then it was also possible that Guest had laid a trap for Kramer on Friday night. The servants had been given the weekend off—as usual. The "household key" had been left in its accustomed place—as usual. The burglar alarm might even have been turned off; that essential fact had never been established. Everything had been made easier for Kramer, not more difficult.

Everything except Charlie Quade, on guard with his Colt .45 automatic.

". . . exactly, are you here now?" Guest was demanding. Divining that my attention had wandered, he had raised his voice imperiously, compelling my attention.

Why was I there? he was asking.

He'd given me my chance—my last chance, maybe my only chance.

Should I take it—take the gamble?

Without Friedman to back me up, without prior consultation, without departmental authorization, should I gamble on an unproven, untested theory, a theory that had come to me only moments before?

Should I accuse Alexander Guest of planning Kramer's death?

Should I—*could* I—confront one of the world's most successful trial lawyers with a theory that was still incomplete, a theory that I would have to piece together as I went along—a theory that still lacked one essential element, one final piece of the puzzle?

"Well?" Guest was saying, "are you going to answer the question, Lieutenant?"

His arrogance, his obvious contempt—and most of all, the way he pronounced *Lieutenant*—all of it came instantaneously together, making my decision for me.

"I'm here," I began, "because there're still some unanswered questions in the Quade homicide. I'm here to try and get those questions—those contradictions—cleared up." I hesitated a moment, then decided to say, "You're a famous lawyer, Mr. Guest. You can help me."

He waved a haughty, condescending hand. "That's why I'm here, Lieutenant—to get this resolved. Don't you understand that?"

Taking one final moment to try and organize my thoughts, I automatically nodded, answering vaguely that, yes, I understood. Then, realizing that I had to either take the gamble on my unfinished theory or else admit defeat, I said, "We've got four accounts of what happened Friday night—your account, John's, Kramer's and, now, Durkin's. And these accounts don't match, not completely. Or, rather, three of them match, but they don't match the physical evidence." With my eyes on his face, I let a beat pass before I said, "Only your account matches the physical evidence, Mr. Guest."

He, too, let a beat pass. Then, carefully, he asked, "What evidence is that?"

"The shots," I answered. "There were four shots fired. But only—" Interrupted by the shock of a sudden incredible thought, the sentence went unfinished. As if the shock had been physical, I felt my body suddenly tighten, reacting.

Had the sudden thought completed my theory, supplied the puzzle's missing piece?

"Well?" he demanded, "what about the shots?"

"There were four shots," I answered, "but only you heard them. The other three witnesses, if we assume that they're telling the truth, were all—"

"But they obviously weren't telling the truth," he said

impatiently. "If one of them is the murderer, either Kramer or Durkin, then it goes without saying that one of them is lying."

"That's assuming one of them did it." As I spoke, I looked at Marie, sitting beside me on the couch. Her eyes were fixed, staring at me. Her body was rigid. Had she guessed what I was thinking? Did she know what I was about to say?

I realized Guest was looking at both of us in turn. As I shifted my gaze to him, I saw his eyes widening incredulously.

"You don't think —" He broke off, his mouth momentarily working impotently. "You aren't here, questioning Marie, because you think—" Now his ice-gray eyes narrowed. At first incredulous, Alexander Guest's famous face was twisting into an unrecognizable mask, distorted by sudden fury.

"You think she killed Quade." Guest's voice was clogged deep in his throat. "That's what you think, isn't it? That's why you're here. Because you think Marie did it."

Still struggling to master the shock of the incredible conviction that had seared my thoughts only moments before, I said, "No, Mr. Guest, I don't think Marie did it. I think—" I drew a long, deep breath. "I think you did it."

"You think—" Sudden derision tugged at the mask of fury that still contorted the famous face. The voice was still thickened by surpressed anger as he said, "You're crazy, Hastings. You must be crazy. It's the only explanation."

Beside me, Marie Kramer stirred, turning to face me. "How?" she whispered. "Why, for God's sake?"

Still with my eyes on Guest, I said, "All four stories agree to the point where you heard the shots. At that point, you said you heard four shots. One shot, followed by three more. Is that correct, Mr. Guest?"

He made no reply, gave no indication that he'd heard. His face was utterly impassive.

"Or was it three shots, that you heard—then? Three shots, not four?"

Still he sat silently, staring at me with his cold, watchful eyes.

"Let's say it was three shots that you heard. Then let's

say that, after you heard the shots, you went to the window and saw Kramer and John in the driveway. You assumed that Kramer had done the shooting, and was escaping. You left the window, and got your revolver. While you were doing that, you naturally couldn't see Durkin, who was leaving the premises. You went downstairs and found Quade in the hallway outside John's room. He'd been shot. Once. In the upper chest. By Durkin. But you hadn't seen Durkin, so you thought Kramer had done it. And you saw your chance. One more shot, and Kramer could be out of your life. He could be convicted of murder.

"And that's what you did, Mr. Guest. You shot Quade through the neck, just below the ear. You used the revolver lying close to the body—Kramer's revolver, as it turned out, registered to him. You didn't know that at the time, though. But you did know, probably, that Quade carried a .45 automatic, the same gun you carried in the Marine Corps. So you were sure—almost sure—that Kramer had used the revolver.

"You wiped your prints off the revolver, and went outside and ditched the gun in the shrubbery close to your house, where you knew it would be found—hopefully by the police, not by a pedestrian. And then—" I spread my hands. "Then you went inside, and called the police. When I questioned you initially, you said you heard four shots. You assumed, probably, that Kramer had stayed around long enough to have heard the fourth shot, and you wanted your story to square with his. Either that, or you just stuck to the physical evidence, as any good lawyer would.

"Your biggest potential problem, of course, was John, and how much credence the court would give to his story, since it would corroborate Kramer's. But you knew you had a good chance of blocking John's testimony." I paused, then added, "And you knew, if you could do that, you could probably get Kramer convicted of murder. Especially with your connections."

As I talked, I kept my eyes on Guest's face, searching for some clue to the effect of my words. His face still remained

impassive, revealing nothing. His eyes didn't falter, didn't fall away. The silence lengthened, as taut and ominous as the empty moments following a scream of agony. Finally he spoke. His voice was cold as tempered steel.

"Did that scenario occur to you now—just now, as we were talking?" It was a calm, concise question, a professional's question, asked by a trial lawyer who'd made his fortune thinking moment to moment on his feet, pleading before a jury.

"Most of it just occurred to me now," I admitted. "Or, at least, the part that concerns you."

Judiciously, he nodded, a connoisseur's measured approval. "It's a good scenario. It accounts for everything, ties everything together. You're to be congratulated, Lieutenant." He inclined his handsome head, nodding urbane approval. "An impressive performance." He rose to his feet. "And now, if you'll excuse me, I've got to be going. I've got a meeting at eleven, and I want to be sure that John's—"

"Is that all you're going to say?" It was Marie Kramer's voice, beside me. She was on her feet, confronting her father. "Aren't you going to deny it?"

He turned his calm, clear gaze on her. "Denials don't mean anything. It's what he can prove—and can't prove. And there's no proof—no proof of what he says. Absolutely none. He doesn't have a witness, and there's no physical evidence that corroborates the story. So it's just that, you see—a story. A theory that fits the facts." He smiled at her: a small, supercilious smile, completely controlled, utterly self-satisfied. "But without a witness, or physical evidence—without a confession, the story is worthless. Absolutely worthless. I guarantee it."

As Marie Kramer stared hard into her father's face, I saw her eyes come alive, burning with sudden hatred. Except for brief moments of self-defeating anger, it was the first time I'd seen anything but confusion in her eyes, the first time I'd seen her body draw indignantly taut. Fists clenched tightly at her sides, she advanced on her father.

"You did it," she whispered. "I know you did it. I can *see* it. I can *feel* it."

The supercilious smile remained in place. Only the eyes changed, frozen to contemptuous ice.

"You never could get things straight, Marie. Even as a small girl, you never got things quite right. It's a pity, too. Because you're really quite bright. You've always been bright." He paused a moment, then quietly added, "Too bright, obviously, for your own good—too self-destructive." He nodded to me, opened the door, and quietly left the room.

Slowly, visibly, the passion drained from Marie Kramer's face. The strength left her body as she sank helplessly down on the couch, head bowed. As the sobbing began, I heard her say, "Everything I ever wanted he always took from me. First he'd give me things. Lots of things—expensive things. But then, whenever I displeased him, he'd take them away. All of them. So I always had new things, you see. Never old things. Just new things—a long succession of new things, that never seemed to really belong to me. Toys, cars—boys, men. He took them all away—and then replaced them. Or else he made me replace them, if they couldn't be bought."

TWENTY

DURING THE ENTIRE TIME I'D BEEN TALKING, JAMES STRINGfellow hadn't once interrupted, hadn't taken his eyes from mine. His long, pale, sorrowerful-looking schoolmaster's face hadn't once revealed a single flicker of reaction to anything I'd said. When I finished talking, he sat motionless for a moment, still expressionlessly staring at me. Then he sighed once, deeply, and carefully removed his rimless glasses. He held the glasses up to the light, examined them minutely, then deposited them carefully on the desk in front of him, where they reflected the bright afternoon sun. He sighed again, looked at me again. Without his trademark old-fashioned glasses, the assistant D.A.'s face looked vulnerable, unprotected.

"I'm wondering," he said finally, "what action you expect us to take on all this."

I looked at Friedman, signifying that it was his turn. We'd been in Stringfellow's office for more than an hour. During most of that time, beginning at the beginning, I'd reviewed the entire Quade murder case. The more I talked, the more depressed I began to feel, describing Alexander Guest and his schemes. As Friedman began to talk, I speculated on the reasons for my sudden feeling of depression. My conclusion: Stringfellow's frozen reaction to my report

must certainly mean that he had no intention of accepting my ideas, no intention of acting on the information I'd brought him.

"We're not asking for anything," Friedman said, speaking to Stringfellow. "We're just laying it out for you."

With an exaggerated air of regretful patience, Stringfellow wearily shook his head. "You may think you're laying it out for me, Lieutenant. But you're not. You're giving me nothing but theories. Granted, they're interesting-sounding theories. But, still, just theories."

"We're telling you what happened. It's the only progression that fits the facts. All the facts."

"You may be right. It might've happened just exactly as Lieutenant Hastings says. But insofar as proof is concerned—facts, physical evidence—you haven't given me enough to ask for an indictment against a skid row bum, let alone against Alexander Guest, for God's sake. For instance—" Stringfellow put on his glasses, using both hands to adjust them on his long nose before he fixed his patient, regretful gaze on Friedman. "For instance, do you have a positive paraffin test on Guest?"

"No. But we've got a minute-by-minute time frame," Friedman said. "A second-by-second time frame, really. And Guest is the only one who fits the frame."

"Bruce Durkin fits the frame," Stringfellow answered quietly. "As far as I'm concerned, he's our suspect. He says he fired one shot, I say he fired twice. And, what's more, my boss says the same thing."

"Your boss plays poker with Alexander Guest," Friedman said. "Every other Wednesday night."

"I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that, Lieutenant."

"Durkin didn't fire that fourth shot," I said.

"That's your opinion," Stringfellow answered, speaking in his dry, precise monotone. "It doesn't happen to be mine. I think he's guilty. And I think he'll fall."

"He'll probably fall like a rotten apple," Friedman said. "But that doesn't mean he's guilty."

Stringfellow shrugged indifferently, and looked elabo-

rately at his watch. I suspected that, secretly, he felt relieved. If we'd given him a tighter case, supported by physical evidence, his decision not to prosecute Guest would have been made more difficult. Especially if Chief Dwyer decided to back us up—and also decided to leak our version of the case to the press. But two hours ago, when we'd talked to Dwyer, it was obvious that the chief had no interest in taking on Alexander Guest. For all we knew, Friedman had said, Dwyer might play in the same poker game with the D.A. and Guest.

"What about Kramer?" I asked. "What do we do with him?"

Stringfellow shrugged again. "He's clean, as far as I'm concerned. He can walk. Unless Guest decides to press charges for breaking and entering, Kramer can walk."

"I imagine," I said, "that Guest would rather see Kramer out of jail—and out of town, too."I let a beat pass, then added, "Unless I'm very much mistaken, Guest wants to close up this whole case just as quickly and quietly as possible."

"Well, then—" Stringfellow pushed his chair back from his big walnut desk. "We're all in agreement. Kramer walks—out of town. No problem."

"The gospel according to Alexander Guest," Friedman mutterd. His voice was so low that Stringfellow could pretend he hadn't heard the remark. He could also pretend not to see the contempt in Friedman's eyes—and in my eyes, too.

Stringfellow rose to his feet, nodded formally to us and touched a button on his communications console. We were dismissed.

As I stood up I said, "He's not guilty, you know. Durkin's not guilty of murder."

Stringfellow's face was impassive as he said, "You just tell the facts in court, Lieutenant. Let the jury decide who's guilty. Okay?"

Turning away without answering, I jerked open the door and left the office.

TWENTY-ONE

KRAMER WAS RELEASED FROM JAIL THE FOLLOWING MORNING. Friedman and I talked about it, and decided we could be asking for trouble if we told Kramer, officially, that we thought Guest had killed Quade in an effort to frame him for murder. But, still, I wanted to talk with Kramer, wanted to hear, unofficially, whatever he had to tell me. I wanted to know, one on one, off the record, whether his suspicions squared with mine. So Friedman and I decided to lie. We told Kramer one condition of his release required that I accompany him to San Francisco International and put him on a plane for New York. Waiting for his flight to leave, I'd have my chance to talk to him.

I'd arranged for us to arrive at the airport more than an hour before Kramer's flight left. Earlier, he'd called his wife, who was in New York, raising money for a legal defense that would no longer be necessary. He'd also called Marie Kramer, and talked to her for more than an hour. He hadn't tried to contact John, who was staying at his grandfather's house.

We got coffee and sweet rolls at the airport restaurant, and found a table close to the windows, with a good view of the airport. The day was clear and bright, and hardly a minute elapsed between airliners either landing or taking off.

"I've always liked airports," Kramer said, looking out the window. He gestured to the busy runways. "This is where it's all happening, you know. It's where everything comes together." Since he'd been released, only hours before, he'd obviously recovered his self-confidence, his poise. With his hair carefully combed, clean-shaven, with his trousers pressed and his shoes shined, he looked like the same man I'd first interrogated Saturday morning: a smart, aggressive, executive-style winner. Gone—but probably not forgotten—was the man I'd interrogated only two days later: the haggard, harassed man with the haunted eyes and unsteady hands, dressed in the orange prison jump suit, sitting hunched behind the interrogation room's chipped steel table.

We sat in silence for a moment, each of us staring out across the airport. The time was almost eleven o'clock. Kramer's flight left at noon. In a half hour, the boarding process would begin.

I took a deep breath, and began the speech Friedman and I had so carefully planned. First I told Kramer that what I was about to say was unofficial, that I would deny ever having said it. Then I told him everything: all the facts, all the theories—all the reasons why Guest would probably never come to trial. Not unless, I finished, we could develop new evidence.

"My God," Kramer breathed, staring at me with an almost palpable intensity, his dark eyes boring into mine. "Do you really think that's the way it happened?"

I nodded. "I think that's the way it happened. But, as I said already, that's totally off the record. I'll deny ever having said it."

"What'd Marie say? What's she think?"

"I think she agrees with me about her father. But that's off the record, too."

"She didn't tell me," he mused. "When I talked to her this morning, she didn't tell me anything about all this."

"I wouldn't expect her to tell you. Not over the phone, anyhow."

"The bastard," he said, letting his outraged gaze wander out across the airport. "The sick, conniving bastard." He let a moment of silence pass, then once again turned his eyes on me. "He's crazy, you know. Really crazy."

I shrugged. "In court, 'crazy' doesn't count. Not his kind of crazy, anyhow."

He nodded. Now I could see calculation come into his eyes as the meaning of what I'd said began to register. "So what you're telling me," he said slowly, "is that you can't touch him. Not legally."

"When you say 'legally,' you're talking about the D.A. Not me. I just investigate. You know that."

"But you don't think there's much chance he'll be indicted."

"Not unless I can get a confession, or develop new evidence, I don't think there's much of a chance. New evidence—solid new evidence—is all that'll force the D.A. to act."

"So that's what you hope to get from me. New evidence."

"Yes."

"Well," he answered, "you're out of luck, I'm afraid. I've already told you what I know. Everything I know."

"You've told me everything you know about the murder, about Friday night. But what d'you know about Guest—about the way he operates, about the corners he cuts?"

"You're looking for leverage. Is that it? A wedge."

I nodded.

For a moment Kramer looked at me. Then he shook his head and smiled. It was a hard, humorless smile, without hope.

"Alexander Guest doesn't cut corners."

"Everyone cuts corners."

"Listen," he said, "I'm on your side. There's nothing I'd like more than to see that bastard in jail. He's a—a monster. He ruined his wives' lives, and he ruined Marie's life. He tried to ruin my life, too. And, barring a miracle, he's probably

going to ruin John, too. So I'd do anything—*anything*—to see that Guest gets what's coming to him. But I'm a realist. In my business, only the realists survive. And I'm telling you that I don't think Guest will ever go to jail. Never."

"He killed a man. You know it, and I know it. And he knows it, too. It happened. It won't go away."

The grim smile returned. "'Murder will out.' Is that what you're saying?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying. I've seen it happen. I've *made* it happen."

Now the smile warmed. "You're a stubborn bastard, aren't you? You're—" Suddenly he broke off. I saw his eyes widen, saw his jaw slacken with amazement as he stared at some point behind me, across the restaurant. I twisted in my chair, to follow his gaze.

Marie Kramer and John stood just inside the doorway of the restaurant. The boy was dressed in a miniature blue blazer, gray flannel trousers and a preppy maroon cap. Both mother and child carried a variety of mismatched suitcases and nylon duffel bags—plus a boy's baseball bat and fielder's glove, and a pair of miniature skiis.

With one hand braced on the table, as if for support, Kramer rose slowly, incredulously to his feet. Marie Kramer spoke to the child, apparently telling him to stay near the door. She placed the baggage she was carrying on the floor beside the boy. Then, tentatively, she began walking toward us, her dark, tortured eyes darting from me to Kramer. Her face was twitching uncontrollably, an animated mask of naked misery. Gordon Kramer advanced a few hesitant paces to meet her. For a moment they stood motionless, face to face, both of them mute. Then Marie dropped her eyes and dug into her purse with awkward, blundering fingers. Finally she withdrew an airplane ticket.

"Here—" She handed Kramer the ticket. "It's for John. One way."

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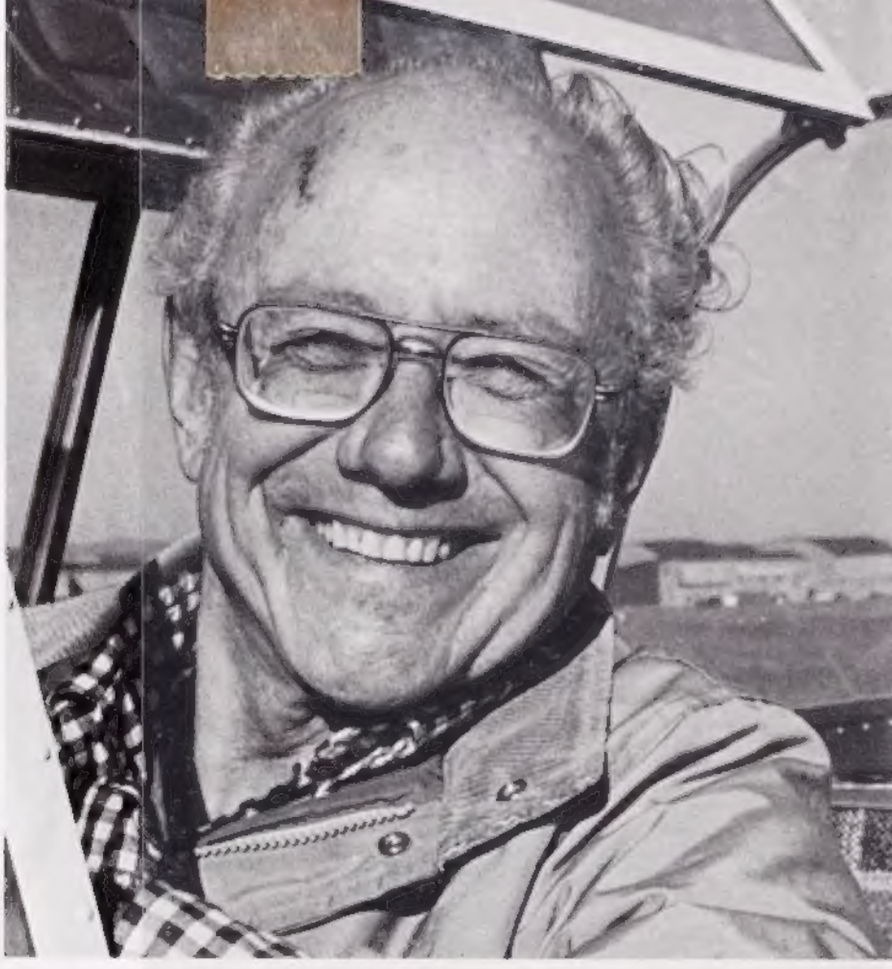

COLLIN WILCOX was born in Detroit and educated at Antioch College. Since 1950, he's lived in San Francisco, where he operated a small business before becoming a full-time mystery/suspense novelist. Mr. Wilcox writes that "The most important things in my life are my two sons, my Victorian house, my typewriter, my airplane, my books and my ten-speed bike. Aside from writing, I consider building one's own house one of life's most exciting and fulfilling pleasures."

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